

THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS  
IN SOCIAL TRANSITIONS:  
CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN NEGOTIATING US HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Social Personality Psychology in  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract  
THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS  
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by  
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The experiences of immigrant women of color within US higher education provide a unique opportunity to understand the complex influences of intersecting identities within changing social contexts. This study was designed to determine how the social categories of gender, class, race, and nationality operate in Caribbean immigrant women's experience of being college students. Focus groups and life story interviews were conducted with 27 English-speaking Caribbean-born women attending CUNY undergraduate colleges. The data yielded four main findings: First, Caribbean gender roles and traditions are not homogenous; hence, there is variation in the ways in which these affect women's experiences in the US. Second, nested, overlapping and unrelated social sites shape identity and exclusion for these participants and conversely, their identity determines the social settings and categories of belonging they select. Third, although positive marginality theory explains some of this group's response, it fails to account for members' low levels of participation in any explicitly pan-African activist or advocacy structure. Finally, portraits, based on the life story interviews, confirm the

issues raised by the group data, as well as introduce other issues that only become evident in close, individual level analysis. This study of immigrant women of color in higher education has the potential to extend the definition and applications of positive marginality theory, and inform research and practice that addresses on how race, gender and class intersect in social contexts.

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## **Introduction**

*Education as “the practice of freedom” ... will be a reality for women only when we develop an educational methodology that addresses the needs of all women.*

*This is an important feminist agenda.*

*hooks, 2000*

This study focuses on the interrelated effects of gender, race, class, and nationality for immigrant women of color who are in pursuit of a college degree in a US urban area. The inquiry is conceptually located at the intersection of the cross-cultural and educational transitions. That is, the purpose of this work is to examine where Caribbean women’s lives as immigrants in the US meet and overlap with women’s lives as college students. The study has been conducted in order to understand the role attending college plays in Caribbean immigrant women’s motivations for migration, and to identify the personal and social factors involved in this group’s efforts to live within community and institutional structure.

### **The Background:**

Data compiled by the US Census Bureau (1999) on the foreign-born population in the United States reveal that 11% of immigrants are from the Caribbean, exceeded by Central America (51%) and Europe (16%). Immigration flow from the Caribbean to the US is driven by immigrants’ need for educational opportunities and economic advancement. However, although 65% of Caribbean immigrants over the age of 25 have at least a high school education, 84% of women and 83% of men have less than a bachelor’s degree (US Census Bureau, 1999). Further, 20% of Caribbean immigrants are

living below the poverty level in the United States. Comparable figures on immigrants from Europe show that 79% have a high school education or more, 74% of women and 64% of men have less than a bachelor's degree, and 11% are living below poverty level. These statistics suggest that, for immigrants from the Caribbean, their actual experience fall short of the expectations that motivated their relocation.

In the United States, the foreign born are more geographically concentrated than the native population. Ninety-three percent of immigrants (versus 73% of natives) live in metropolitan areas (Fix & Zimmerman, 1997), with 47% of those from the Caribbean highly concentrated in the Northeast (US Census Bureau, 1999). Of U.S. immigrants granted legal alien status in 1993, 71% went to only six states, with New York receiving the second largest number (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Since 1965, arrivals to New York have come mainly from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, and more than half of them have been female (Foner, 1987). Issues related to immigrants, immigrants of color, and immigrant women are, therefore, concentrated in ethnically diverse, urban areas like New York City. These concerns extend beyond descriptions of their educational attainment and economic characteristics, to include psychosocial and cultural factors influencing their experiences. This study is driven by the view that it is important, to not only identify the potential psychological consequences of Caribbean immigrant women being constrained in their pursuits, but also to consider their ability to create alternate paths to attaining their goals.

**Justification for the Research Focus:**

Institutional response to immigration flow has been slow to accommodate racial, cultural, gender and class differences, except in cases where difference has been framed as indicators of deviance and pathology (Fine & Gordon, 1989). During the last decade, however, social science researchers have increased their efforts to understand the processes and consequences of immigration within the context of U.S. schools (for examples, see Lykes, 1994; Olson, 1997; Seller & Weis, 1997). According to Olson (1997), schools represent a microcosm of U.S. society, and hence provide an opportunity to study how students learn to become “Americans”. Research on immigrant student adjustment has focused on elementary and high schools (e.g., Grey, 1990; Grubb, 1995; Kiang, 1996; Tanners, 1997) with less attention to this issue within the context of higher education (for exceptions, see Gittel & Steffy, 1998; Gittel & Steffy, 2000).

Students undergo several formal transitions in the process of moving from one level of schooling to another. In higher education research, significant attention to these transitions has catalogued and addressed the inherent problems for mainstream students. However, issues particular to immigrant students have not been adequately investigated nor addressed. Therefore, ignorance and stereotypical assumptions about immigrant students persist and, in research and in practice, very little has been done to understand the experiences and to address the needs of this specific group.

Failure to notice foreign-born students can be traced to the federal level. Students who were born overseas and move to the United States are not identifiable among statistics reported by the US Department of Education. Reports published by its Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the National Center for Educational Statistics include tables labeled “Enrollment of Persons in Institutions of Higher Education, by

Race/Ethnicity, Sex”. While these may include student of color who were born overseas, they do not identify subgroups of immigrants within the various racial categories.

Similarly, The Institute of International Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement publishes statistics on “Foreign Students Enrolled in Institutions of Higher Education in the United States and Outlying Areas”. These data are, however, on non-immigrants, or foreign-born students who have not immigrated to the US. These organizations are among the leading sources for statistics on students in higher education. Their failure to compile data on foreign-born American residents who are attending US colleges is indicative of how the specifics of this population have been overlooked by US academic institutions.

During the late eighties, psychologists recognized that psychological concepts formerly examined among immigrants, in general, had to be re-examined among immigrants of color, as their experiences were often qualitatively different from that of European immigrants. Acculturation (Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok, 1987), self esteem and identity (Phinney, 1991) and well being (Kuo & Tsai, 1986) were among those concepts most widely examined. Following on that movement, (mostly feminist) researchers (e.g., Anzaldua, 1987) argued for specific attention to immigrant women of color, pointing out that their experiences are not only different from that of men in general, but also different from that of immigrant men of color.

Despite the emergence of work on immigrant Latinas and the subsequent, much smaller body of work on Indian and Asian immigrant women, the psychological experiences of immigrant women of African ancestry remain under-explored. One could argue that the quality of cross-cultural uprootedness binds those who have experienced

migration, distinguishing them from others who have never left where they were born, or where they call home. In that view, there is no need to study specific groups of immigrant women. However, immigrant women are not a homogenous group. The meanings and values of gender shift when women cross cultures, and intersect with race, class, and nationality to shape women's lives in the new country. When women move, they have to learn what these new meanings and values are, and develop ways of living that accommodate and/or reject societal assignments of roles according to race, gender and class. Studying the experiences of one group of women is not sufficient for understanding the experiences of all women of color who migrate. Not only is it important to study different groups in order to understand differences between the groups, but through intensive study researchers gain an understanding of the full range of the immigration experience for specific groups of women.

For Caribbean women who are of African ancestry, the psychological and social issues one would expect to arise from any type of relocation are further compounded by their status as foreign-born Black women. Studying this group allows us to delineate those struggles not based on learning English as a second language, which has been the focus of many immigration studies done in psychology and in education. Although language and expression continue to be an issue for English-speaking immigrants from the Caribbean (Cliff, 1988a), the fact that they do speak English and yet encounter these difficulties makes it easier to recognize how racist and assimilationist attitudes influence immigrants' experiences. Using gender as a unit of analysis is a strategy to demonstrate the complicated dynamics of relocation for people of color. My question builds on the literature on women of color who migrate, towards a closer examination of what happens

to Black women who migrate. This focus is intended to capture the way differences and similarities -- between women, between Black women and men, and among Black women -- interact with social attitudes and structural forces in cultural relocation. Further, this inquiry is framed to assess how and when being defined a foreign-born woman of color has the potential to limit one's access to opportunities, such as the pursuit of a college education. Finally, this framework is designed to determine what personal and cultural resources enable women to transcend these limitations.

Focusing research attention on Caribbean immigrant women who live in urban New York, therefore, provides an opportunity to better understand psychological and socio-cultural issues relevant to immigration and adaptation. Further, focusing on this group of women allows for specific evaluation of the intersection of race, gender and class in local and transnational contexts. Finally, conducting this analysis in the context of US higher education presents an opportunity to investigate immigrant women's perception of the transformative potential of education and permits assessment of those resources that facilitate their persistence and those factors that impede the pursuit of their academic goals.

## Chapter 1

### Literature Review

Opportunities for education are of undeniable value for enabling women to transcend narrowly defined gender and traditional roles (Crespo, 1994; Das Gupta, 1997; hooks, 2000). For example, Das Gupta (1997) makes clear how young women's resistance of cultural expectations was evident in their attempts to gain control over their education, their career plans, and marriage. In her research, women's narratives often named college as the place where they achieved a consciousness that allowed them to reconcile the realities of their own lives with what their parents wanted for them. Despite having to navigate a structurally different US education system that is poorly prepared to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, immigrant women regard educational contexts as being important sites of possibility. It is, therefore, important to recognize those places where encountering differences in social structures, such as educational institutions, create a hazard for women. Of equal importance, is an accompanying focus on the means whereby women creatively tackle these challenges as they pursue the goals that motivated them to leave their home countries.

This literature review is organized as follows: First, research conducted on the response of US educational institutions toward nontraditional students is reviewed. This section is followed by a review of research that addresses how women create possibilities within these restrictive spaces, and more important, how they transcend these boundaries in pursuit of their educational goals. The third section of this review presents a summary of marginality theory and research, followed by a review of work on positive marginality.

This chapter concludes with two theoretical models demonstrating how educators may foster immigrants' resilience in higher education.

### **The Role of Educational Institutions from the view of Immigrant Students**

Mellow (1999) reports that 25% of all undergraduates are African, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American and foreign nationals. The significant number of immigrant students attending US institutions make it essential to reevaluate services provided by US colleges (Grey, 1990; Grubb 1995; Field, 2000). Tanners (1997) argues that the challenges non-traditional students present to institutions are brought into sharper focus in large urban areas, where there are large immigrant populations. In New York City, for example, the number of immigrants to that city between 1982 and 1992 exceeds one million, with the percentage of foreign-born residents steadily increasing from 18.2% in 1970, to 23.6% in 1980, to 28.4% in 1990 (Riveira-Batiz, 1994, cited in Tanners 1997).

The research question that has most often been explored in relation to immigrant youth – what factors promote positive academic orientation, underachievement, or failure among immigrant children or adolescents? (see Ogbu, 1987, 1991 & Suarez-Orozco, 1991 for examples of this work) – must be expanded in the context of higher education. These researchers have focused on assessing the significance of assimilation on immigrant youths' attitudes toward education and success. However, in the context of higher education, assimilating or resisting the orientation of native-born ethnic minorities becomes an inadequate theoretical model -- particularly in urban centers where institutions are largely attended by foreign- and American-born ethnic minority students.

This invites the investigation of alternate explanations for the academic performance of immigrant students in ethnically diverse settings, and suggests the need to delineate the psychological responses to being a cultural minority in a high-stake social context such as a tertiary institution.

Grey's (1990) research used ethnographic data collected at a Kansas City high school, to assess ethnic relationships between immigrant and non-immigrant students, and adjustments made by the school to address immigrants' educational needs. His site, Garden City High School (GCHS), had an enrollment of 1,111 students at the start of the 1988-89 school year, of which approximately one-third was made up of US resident and immigrant Hispanics, immigrant Southeast Asians, and Blacks. Grey found that typical adjustments made by the school had to do with language proficiency, although most of these were for native Spanish speakers. Since almost 8% of the student population were Asian students in addition to speakers of other languages, the inadequacy of such "bilingual programs" was clear.

Grey's (1990) findings also revealed the psychological consequences of an inadequate institutional response to immigrant students. The study of GCHS revealed that immigrant students did not feel their needs are recognized or adequately met. Students reported feeling marginalized by being placed in ESL or LEP classes, where they felt teachers had very low expectations for their success. Even ESL teachers consider their role peripheral to the general goals of the school, and reported that participants of ESL programs were isolated and inadequately prepared for interaction with other immigrant groups as well as with the dominant group. These perceptions were confirmed by immigrant students, who reported that immigrant and non-immigrant students did not

interact with each other “ . . . because we have lower class . . . lower status” (p.420).

Interviews with non-immigrant students revealed that they held assimilationist expectations for immigrant students, expecting newly arrived students to set aside their cultural differences to facilitate relationships with them.

Other work done to assess problems and solutions from students’ perspective includes that of Kiang (1996), whose study provides an example of an urban public university’s attempt at inclusion through the development of an Asian American Studies Curriculum. Using qualitative data (focus groups; individual interviews; students’ creative writing; life history narratives) from five East Asian students who are Cambodian refugees, Kiang investigated factors that influenced student persistence, including their academic, as well as social integration. In the Asian American Studies class, students’ writings became an important survival strategy for giving voice to their experiences and struggles, facilitating their composition skills as well as their mental health. Further, because their background was used as a reference point for discussing relevant majors and career options, the Asian American Studies class was an environment where students could integrate their academic and social lives. Outside of these classes, however, students reported feeling isolated -- having minimal relationships and support from other faculty & staff, inadequate mentoring and advising and minimal exchange between Cambodian students and their peers. Kiang found student motivation to be based on factors external to the academic structure – family expectations, past experience (refugee survival), and even experiencing racial discrimination served as “reference points” for motivating academic achievement.

Kiang allows that Asian American Studies classes have provided basic services, such as an encouraging classroom environment, providing avenues for identity development and expression, and fostering the incorporation of students' experiences into the curriculum. However, he points out that an ethnic-group specific curriculum should be part of a comprehensive institutional strategy to integrate students socially as well as academically. Opportunities to share experiences with other students and faculty, in addition to academic advising and mentoring programs, should be incorporated into the formal institutional structure to allow students further opportunity for integration.

The research by Grey (1990) and Kiang (1996) not only add to the debate regarding the appropriate role of educational institutions in accommodating the interests of a growing immigrant student population but also illustrate the psychological dimensions of this experience for the students who encounter these structural and interpersonal marginalization. This work demonstrates the difficulties that remain when institutions either separate foreign-born students into programs that address their language needs but little else, or attempt to integrate their cultural and academic interests but without efforts to socially integrate students. In both cases, the students experience alienation and difference.

Grubb (1995) posits that the problem of "new student populations" is actually an old one in the history of American education. He questions the wisdom of repeating statistics in order to increase sensitivity to the problem, pointing out that increasing awareness has yet to yield significant change. In his review of common explanations for the failure of schools to educate poor, immigrant, linguistically different and racial minority students, he concludes that subsequent changes in the content and method of

instruction have worked to new students' disadvantage. According to Grubb, responses to new students have been to either ensure access by inclusion, making resources available for new students, or differentiation, efforts to tailor the content and purpose of instruction to different students' needs.

Grubb (1995) argues that efforts based on differentiation or inclusion overlook how the traditional approach to teaching, which he describes as "skills and drills" instruction, fails to engage immigrant and minority students. In his view, such efforts foster a sense of alienation by presenting a culture of text and abstraction that is not a part of their (or their parents') everyday experiences. Further, in the tradition of Jerome Bruner, Grubb points out that conventional instruction allows little space for meaning making, and instead of students learning from their mistakes in a process of learner-centered or active learning, early failure marks the beginning of a pattern of later failures and continued stigma. As an alternative, Grubb presents a vision of pedagogical reform in which teaching methods and the order of content presentation would vary in classrooms, depending on the experiences and interests of the students. Overall, Grubb sees changing the nature of teaching as a more desirable, inclusive response to poor fit between schools and non-traditional students.

In suggesting appropriate responses for US institutions to an increasingly diverse student population, other researchers call into question the nature of teaching. Tanners (1997), suggests the need for new research on how teacher-related problems might be linked to institutional problems, issues, practices, and policies that educators face in teaching newly arrived immigrants. By including students' perspectives in his analysis, Tanners' work makes an important contribution to understanding how institutions are

doing in meeting immigrant students' needs. In interviews conducted in New York City public schools, both teachers and students agreed that schools have not been offering immigrant students the kind of support they need. Participants listed problems such as high student-teacher ratio, too few teachers who are sensitive to the cultural differences students face, and insufficient school resources.

The problems listed by these high-school participants are also indicative of problems that undermine the ability of non-traditional students to continue their education. Gittel and Steffy (1998) investigated reasons students left an urban public community college, at which almost half (45.7%) of the student population was foreign-born. Overall, the most common reason given for leaving that school was money, while 23% of the women interviewed said that family issues such as childcare and pregnancy were the main reasons for their leaving. Other concerns that were related to leaving included students' need for more guidance, more information, easier registration, more financial assistance, more tutoring and intervention, and the need for more faculty involvement.

A more recent study of students who left another public community college in the same city (Gittel & Steffy, 2000) revealed similar problems. Twenty one percent of those students left school because of money, which was the most common reason given by men (30%), but not by women (14.5%). The most common reason given by women (18%) was pregnancy. In addition to personal and family issues, these students also reported incompatibility between their schedules and the schedule of available classes, dissatisfaction with the limited availability of programs, large class sizes, registration procedures, and the inadequacy of the counseling program.

Similar difficulties were discussed in a focus group conducted with women who are members of a community-based educational support group (McFarlane, 2000). Participants were working women of African ancestry, most of whom are Caribbean immigrants, with families. Time, money and child care were the main barriers for women who were not currently in college. Women who were currently enrolled were mostly part-time students and listed the unavailability of services for part-time students, poor dissemination of information about institutional procedure, the absence of mentoring programs, and faculty not valuing non-traditional students as challenges to their academic persistence. For these women, the availability of classes in the evening or on weekends was helpful, but not enough. They reported a desire to see institutions extend the hours of administrative offices and the library, and make more of an effort to make the academic experience of evening and weekend students as enriching as that of day students, by scheduling some extra-curricular programs during that time.

Clearly, attempts made so far to successfully integrate immigrant and non-traditional students into US institutions of learning have not been overwhelmingly effective. A positive first step to correcting this trend has been for researchers to include students' perspectives in their analyses. However, the tendency has been for researchers to ask students about their experiences and then for the researchers to suggest the solutions. An essential extension of this work is to involve students beyond the level of discussing of how their needs are not being met, to invite their creative imaginings of how current efforts may be improved. For example, Roberts (1993) argues that potentially binding influences do not necessarily render women powerless if other, positive, features are present in the academic environment. Writing from her experiences

as a Latina attending a public university, Roberts lists features she viewed to be essential for women of color to successfully negotiate the higher education experience. These include the presence of positive models of cultural identity, accessible and supportive faculty members (e.g., minority faculty who have higher expectations of minority students and faculty members who share information about funding and research opportunities), and support services (e.g., child-care and mentoring). She describes these as useful tools for goal achievement, which facilitate women's survival of difficult circumstances and foster spiritual growth and positive self-esteem within a hostile environment.

In hand with suggestions to improve institutional efforts at accommodation, must be a recognition of the amazing results immigrants have achieved, despite the limitations of their situations. As Martín-Baró (1994) charged, helping people to gain control over their own existence requires recognizing and using their own attributes. The review thus far has focused on immigrants in general because so little of the literature provides information on issues specific to women. However, among the challenges to academic persistence that have been highlighted in this review are factors linked to traditional gender roles for women (e.g., access to money, pregnancy, and childcare). In this vein, the focus of this review now turns to determining ways in which immigrant women have persisted, despite the inadequacy of institutional support.

### **Personal and Cultural Factors Influencing Educational Persistence**

Structures of patriarchal dominance and race and class discrimination operate in the lives of many immigrant women of color – and these exert their effects within, as

well as outside of, educational institutions. The processes whereby these function within institutions of learning have been discussed in the previous section, with the emphasis on highlighting the unmet needs of immigrant students. In this section of the review, the focus shifts to a discussion of the personal and sociocultural factors that contribute to the educational experience for foreign-born women of color. These are a complex mix of hindrances and helps for immigrant women in pursuit of a college degree.

Crespo (1994) examined the effect of a popular saying that originated in Puerto Rican working-class culture: “Study in case your husband turns out to be no good”. Many Puerto Rican women report having been given this advice by their mothers. Crespo points out that while this counsel recommends education as a route to independence and self-determination, it is based on traditional ideas about women’s roles (heterosexuality, getting married), with education being the alternative to the ideal.

Between 1990 and 1992 Crespo conducted life history interviews with thirty Puerto Rican women living in New York and New Jersey to examine these contradictions, and assessed the influence of this guidance on the upbringing and later life choices of Puerto Rican women. Her analysis was grounded in an investigation of the historical development of education for women in PR. Crespo proposes that education became an issue for working class Puerto Rican women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of an increased awareness of the gains associated with education and paid labor. Despite the newly discovered benefits of education, however, Puerto Rican women’s desire to study and to work was often met with resistance, and was accomplished at great costs.

The story of Consuelo, an immigrant to New York, demonstrates how Puerto Rican women confront multiple challenges to pursuing an education, and can be used as a

starting point for understanding the struggles of other immigrant women of color.

Consuelo's language, race and class became barriers to education in the United States, and added to the patriarchal notions that had held her back in her home country. Women such as Consuelo, who persevere in their educational goals, despite traditional attitudes and racist assumptions, achieve accumulated "revolutionary effects" (Crespo, 1994; p. 148). Crespo discusses this groundbreaking more fully:

"An education gave women the possibility of depending less on men's wages for their survival and that of their children. Financial self-sufficiency increased women's options and gave them a better position from which to negotiate their relations within society. Women's struggles for education and the ability to support a family without a husband also challenged structures of race and class that kept women subordinated" (p. 148).

Women's decisions to migrate to the United States, therefore, are often based not only on their own ambitions, but on the opportunities they want for their families (Pessar, 1999). While their actions might be culturally innovative, by extending their ambitions beyond traditionally defined roles women were, in effect, pioneers for themselves and for others in their social sphere. Being inventive in order to facilitate educational access for themselves and for others is crucial for poor women of color for who this access would be otherwise impossible. Hurtado (1999) conducted a case study of Inocencia, a Mexican woman who led a cross-border existence between Mexico and Texas, and found this educational activism among the participant's motivations:

“Inocencia did not only want to reunite her family but she also wanted them to succeed. She was very willing to take the initiative to insure that all of her children would obtain the educational opportunities that the United States had to offer” (p.93).

This analysis is a departure from the common depiction of female immigrants in a supporting role to men who immigrate, and contradicts stereotypical descriptions of poor Mexican women. Pointing out that the “master narratives” associated with immigration are based on men, Hurtado maintains that Inocencia’s situation is common to that of many immigrant women. Inocencia, is a woman who, when she was divorced and a mother of two at age 26, took responsibility for her family (her own children, as well as her sister and her children) and moved to Texas as an undocumented worker. Her roles of mother and older sister required that she take the initiative to seek a better life in order to provide opportunities for herself, her sister, and their children.

Like Conseuelo’s story, this account of Inocencia’s life is illustrative of how the simultaneity of gender, race, nationality, and class contributes to the interruptions and challenges immigrant women of color encounter in pursuit of education and its benefits. Having abandoned her nursing education when she got married, Inocencia completed her degree while pregnant with her second child and went to work in the local hospital. Her nursing training became the basis of her autonomy and the survival of her family when her husband was unable to find work. When her family’s dislike of her husband and economic stress led to their divorce, Inocencia moved to live in a border city where she found work in a clinic. When that clinic closed, she moved across the border to

Mercedes, Texas. Although Inocencia was not legally entitled to work in the United States, she took a chance because that was where she found work.

Survival strategies employed by immigrant women as told of in these narratives are obliterated by the statistics quoted in state and national reports on dropouts. As their stories indicate, some students leave institutions, but return (either to the same one, to another, or to several others) and eventually earn a degree. Gittel and Steffy (1998) report similar findings in their study of students who left an urban public community college before earning a degree: 70% of the students interviewed said they wanted to return to school, had already transferred, or were back in school. In another study, Gittel and Steffy (2000) found that 59% intended to return to school, 28% had already transferred, and 4.9% were either back at that school or were on a leave of absence. One respondent, a 23 year-old woman said, “I definitely want to go back. I am trying to go back next semester. I planned to be at (the 2 year college) for about a year and a half and then transfer to (a 4 year college), but that got shot because my grades dropped – I was doing too much with work – there was too much on my plate and school was the last thing on it” (Gittel & Steffy, 2000).

Reports that students who leave college before graduation intend to return are encouraging. However, students’ intentions can not reliably predict what will eventually occur. In one study conducted by Gittel and Steffy (1998), only 2.5% of the former students contacted had graduated. In another study, 45% of the students interviewed said they had not enrolled with the intention of earning a degree (Gittel & Steffy, 2000). These researchers argue that using graduation rates to assess the effects of attending college obscures other benefits students report, such as a broadening of their world view,

increased English language proficiency and an increased sense of responsibility. These are undeniable benefits that can significantly improve the lives of these students and should not be underemphasized. However, we must also consider the remaining 55% of the former students who *had* enrolled with the intention of earning a degree. In addition, 16% of the interviewees said they had enrolled intending to transfer to another college, most likely a four-year college. We don't know how many of those students are among the 29% of interviewees who had, in fact, transferred. Indeed, despite most African American community college students expressing a desire to complete a BA degree, less than 15% transfer to a four-year school and fewer still graduate (Rendón & Nora, 1994). Focusing on the other benefits students gain from attending college runs the risk of becoming a justification for high attrition rates. While it is true that some students do enroll to take a few classes (or one particular class) without making the commitment to earning a degree, it is possible that those same students would aspire toward a degree if it were more accessible.

Dropouts from higher education have been the subject of much research attention (see Tinto, 1975 for a review). Also included in that body of work are models developed to address this phenomenon as it relates to underrepresented ethnic minorities (eg., Richardson & Skinner, 1991; Justiz, Wilson, & Björk, 1994). Besides 'dropouts', other terms used to refer to students who leave college before earning a degree include 'leavers', 'noncompleters', 'non-persisters', and 'stopouts'. McAfee (2000), who conducted a qualitative study of American Indians in undergraduate Science, Engineering and Mathematics (SEM) and business programs, points out that these labels signify individual failure and contribute to an overall disregard of the various reasons students

may have to leave college before returning to complete their degree. McAfee's research gave rise to the conceptual framework of "stepping out", which encompasses the individual choice that is involved in this pattern of college-going. Interviews revealed that moving in and out of college is a typical attendance pattern for American Indians. McAfee quotes one participant who took 12 years to complete an undergraduate degree: "During my years at the university I saw that many Indian students would be enrolled for a while and then leave. Maybe after they got more money or took classes at a community college they would come back and then maybe for other reasons they would leave again. That's basically what I did, sort of step into and out of college more than once" (p. 8).

McAfee (2000) argues that attrition rates are so high for some ethnic minority groups in certain disciplines that numerical descriptions are meaningless. However, their individual stories explain the circumstances of their lives that contribute to them having to leave college. Her model includes family support, academic preparation and performance, financial resources, motivation, alcohol and drug use, cultural identity and institutional interface as "stepping stones" or significant elements that may, depending on the individual situation, influence whether ethnic minority students continue or discontinue their studies. Interestingly, cultural identity emerged as a central factor to many students' stories and was tied to other stepping stones. For example, having family role models, a sense of mutual caring which motivated students to finish school so they could improve their families' circumstances, and a strong cultural identity increased the likelihood of staying in college. However, having a weak cultural identity, family responsibilities such as child care, or having to find work to support the family contributed to disrupted studies.

The importance of cultural identity in these participants' stories is not surprising, considering the large body of research that has established a link between immigrants' and ethnic minority groups' psychological well-being and their ability to negotiate dual contexts -- that of the dominant culture and their own ethnic minority group culture (Padilla, 1994; Jones, 1988; Triandis, 1981). According to LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton (1993), members of minority ethnic groups who achieve bicultural competence (the ability to move back and forth between cultures) are more likely to maintain psychological well being. McAfee's findings show, however, that while the ability to move between ethnic minority group culture and the dominant culture is important, students' success is dependent on them retaining a strong identification with their ethnic group. It is, therefore, crucial that there be continuity between their home/community environments and the culture of the classroom.

The findings of these studies underscore the enormous odds women overcome to return to college to complete their degrees, and the resilience involved in their successful completion of a degree. The stories provide information that is important for addressing and improving the retention rates of non-traditional undergraduates. A concern that exceeds keeping women in college, however, includes an evaluation of how women may be affected by their experience of an unsupportive institutional environment, as part of their experience of the larger US cultural context. It is, therefore, worth exploring the extent to which this group may be marginalized and the implications of this marginality for their psychological well-being and success.

**Marginality**

Park (1928) defined a “marginal man” as an outcome of population contact in human migration whereby a hierarchy of ethnic and racial groups emerged, leaving persons who neither belong to their own (minority) group nor to the dominant (majority) group. According to Park, this marginalized social position leads to the development of a “marginal personality”, where individuals become conflicted, unstable, and disillusioned. Stonequist (1937) extended Park’s original formulation by studying societies where cultural invasion and migration had led to the development of what he described as racial hybrids (e.g., “The Colored People of Jamaica”; “The Eurasians of India”) and cultural hybrids (e.g., “The American Negro”; “First and Second-Generation Immigrants”). His studies of such groups provided support for Park’s marginality theory and detailed the personality traits typical of the psychologically maladjusted marginal man.

In the vast body of empirical and theoretical work that ensued since Park first introduced the concept, social science researchers have published qualifications, refinements, re-examinations and comprehensive reviews of marginality theory (e.g., Taylor, 1940; Goldberg, 1941; Green, 1947; Reisman, 1954; Antonovsky, 1956; Dickie-Clarke, 1966; Germani, 1980). In this literature the predominant critique of marginality theory targeted Parks’ and Stonequist’s assumption that the marginal situation must lead to psychological maladjustment, and hence, the marginal personality. This work served to tease apart the psychological and sociological dimensions of marginality. Much of this work clarified the definition of those social situations that can lead to marginality, and provided more detailed criteria for identifying the negative psychological outcomes associated with the marginal situation.

In addition, studies have demonstrated the relevance of marginality theory for groups beyond those upon which the original theory was based, thus broadening its application beyond situations of racial and cultural conflict. Test cases included women (Hacker, 1951; Walstedt, 1974; Nelson, 1984), aboriginal communities in Australia (Berry, 1970); working class law students in an ivy-league law school (Granfield, 1991); applied social psychologists (Mayo, 1982); and Jews (Seeman, 1956; Weisberger, 1992). Other studies examined the relationship between marginality and constructs such as group relations (Mann, 1958), the extraversion-intraversion dimension (Wonder & Cotton, 1980), and spatial relations in the classroom (Haber, 1982).

### **Positive Marginality**

Although it is important to study cases of psychological distress that may result from holding a marginal status, there is no necessary relationship between marginal status and psychological disorders (Shibutani, 1961). In fact, some researchers have decried social scientists' preoccupation with the possible pathological effects of being marginalized (Reisman, 1954; Seeman, 1956; Mayo, 1982). Researchers have argued the possibility of substantial benefits associated with marginality, and have found that marginality can provide a space for radical openness and possibility (hooks, 1990), open-mindedness and intellectual creativity (Veblen, 1934 & Simmel, 1950; cited in Seeman, 1956), professional effectiveness (Mayo, 1982), and social activism (Unger, 1998). Where it is possible for individuals to adjust such that they develop a positive personal orientation to their marginality, the benefits of the marginal position are enhanced and the costs reduced.

Positive marginality involves seeing one's stigmatizing characteristics as positive, and awareness that injustice is rooted in structural processes (Unger, 2000). This perspective is accompanied by a vision of collective as well as individual responsibility for social change. As Unger asserts, ". . . a view of reality that recognizes the overwhelming nature of gender, race and class oppression can be debilitating unless it includes a view that the individuals can be agents of change" (2000; p.177). It is the conviction that one's action can effect change that allows marginalized individuals to work toward change for themselves and for others.

Foreign-born women of African ancestry who live in the United States are members of at least three historically marginalized groups: Women; Blacks; and immigrants. However, membership in a group that has been the victim of discrimination does not predict awareness of marginality, neither is minority status necessarily associated with an ideology of the world that recognizes the role of structural factors in influencing one's reality (Unger, 1988). Studies of personal epistemology among minority student populations (Unger, Draper & Pendergrass, 1986, cited in Unger, 2000; Unger, 1988) found that only participants with a strong identification with their marginalized group had a constructionist view of the world. Thus, women did not hold more constructionist views than men, but self-identified feminists scored in a more constructionist direction than did other women. Similarly, although mean scores of Blacks and Asians were more positivist than the mean scores of White students, Black students who were involved in Black political and social organizations appeared more constructionist than Blacks who did not identify similarly. Further, Black students who

had a more constructionist view of the world were also more likely to identify themselves as marginalized.

It is important to consider if Caribbean immigrant women perceive themselves to be marginalized and to examine how appropriate this group may be as a case for investigating positive marginality. Novels and other works of fiction are sometimes useful for gaining insights about the populations that social scientists study. The theme of marginalization is prominent in Paule Marshall's autobiographical novel and short stories (Waneik, 1983). In *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (Marshall, 1959) the protagonist, Selina, is an adolescent girl growing up with her Barbadian family in Brooklyn, New York. Selina's story explores gender dynamics within her family and community, relationships between the immigrant and Black community, and her search for identity, despite the dictates of tradition. It also portrays her ambivalence toward going to college and how she dealt with the responsibility of knowing what her success would mean to her community.

In her review of Marshall's work, Waneik describes Selina as vacillating "...between two extremes, neither a Barbadian nor an American, but a permanent and unhappy outsider" (p.46). Reading the novel within the theoretical frame of positive marginality, however, allows an alternate interpretation of Selina's life. She eventually excelled academically, winning the coveted scholarship offered by the Barbadian Association, and landed a lead in the dance recital. Her academic performance was mainly a scheming act of defiance against her mother and the community: she won the scholarship and, having gained their admiration, seized the opportunity to denounce the community's materialistic strivings. On the other hand, dance was an extracurricular

activity that provided her a space for creativity and expression. It would have been easier for her to only participate in Caribbean-related activities and to reproduce traditional values, as the other Barbadian girls did, and as her mother wanted her to do. She could also have been persuaded by her boyfriend who, in his efforts to dissuade her from participating in the dance recital, labeled her inclusion as tokenism. Instead, perhaps because of her acute awareness of those characteristics that stigmatized her in the eyes of both communities, she developed and pursued her own definition of happiness.

Selina's story provides complicated evidence of positive marginality. Hers is the classic marginality as described by Parks' theory: she neither felt she belonged in the dominant group of White Americans nor in the Black sub-group of the Barbadian community. However, there is no evidence of pathology in Selina; in her I see evidence of resilience, creativity and individuality. These are framed within a distinct consciousness of being Black, not simply Barbadian. Selina's hybridized identity influenced her experiences within the ethnic community and outside of it. Rather than being immobilized in between two worlds, she is moving deliberately within, between and throughout alternate spaces, working the limits of her situation (Martín-Baró, 1994). She has not assimilated but has chosen to reflect her own distinct blend of social and cultural influences.

Selina is socially marginalized, as are other Caribbean immigrant women. As has been done with Selina's story, it is possible to find complex evidence of positive marginality among this group. There are, however, limits to how well current definitions of positive marginality explain Selina's situation. She is, at best, ambivalent about being Barbadian. Therefore, although one aspect of her marginality is because of her race and

her nationality, the margin she chose was not within her ethnic community, as that would not have been a haven for her. Undoubtedly, there are Caribbean immigrant women for whom the community is a refuge and buffer from the hardships of negotiating dominant settings. Positive marginality may look different across these variations of community orientation, This realization suggests some knotty questions, which deserve attention within the current study: Is the ability to develop a positive personal orientation towards their ethnic group fundamental to these non-traditional students pursuing higher education, or to their cultural adaptation? Is positive marginality necessary for Caribbean immigrant women's academic persistence?

### **Positive Marginality: A Pathway to Resilience in Higher Education**

Work by Tierney (1993) and Cummins (1993) provide concrete examples of how institutional efforts can foster positive marginality and in so doing, improve the educational experiences of minority students. Using a theoretical model of intergroup power relations, Cummins examined the relationship between academic failure in ethnic minority students and power relations between minority groups and the majority group. Cummins reviewed his own construct of students' bicultural ambivalence in relation to home and school cultures; Ogbu's work on the academic effects of discrimination towards ethnic minorities and their internalization of the inferior status ascribed to them; and Feuerstein's work attributing failure to the disruption of intergenerational transmission processes caused by the alienation of a group from its own culture (Cummins, 1984; Ogbu, 1978; Feuerstein, 1979; cited in Cummins, 1993). Cummins concluded: "In all three conceptions, widespread school failure does not occur in

minority groups that are positively oriented toward both their own and the dominant culture, that do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group, and that are not alienated from their own cultural values” (p. 105). Further, he argued that the pattern of disempowerment among minority groups in school reflects the disempowerment their communities experience. Conversely, educational practices that reverse societal patterns lead to minority students’ success.

Tierney (1993) contrasted models of social integration and critical theory to demonstrate how these theoretical perspectives can lead to difference in how marginalized students’ experiences are interpreted. In his view, although the social integration model explains how cultural differences encountered in a mainstream institution may cause difficulties for minority students, the model assumes that to be successful, students must disassociate themselves from their home communities to engage themselves socially and intellectually with the academic environment. Tierney points out that this model does not take seriously the consequences for those students who do not successfully integrate into the social and academic life of the institution. Further, he argues that the model stops short of describing how students’ cultural diversity can be incorporated into the educational system to allow for true “integration”.

Using a case study of one Native American student to give voice to other students who shared similar dilemmas in college, Tierney shows how the assimilationist assumptions of the social integration model ignores crucial aspects of the lives of historically disenfranchised students. In contrast, a critical perspective requires the incorporation of variables beyond those that have been traditionally used to study student participation, such as parental education, age and socioeconomic status. Tierney argues

that factors such as where students grew up, the extent of their participation in culturally specific activities, and how traditional or non-traditional they are according to their ethnic group's social laws are important in contextualized studies of ethnic minority students' academic experiences.

Unger's assurance that positive marginality can be cultivated provides hope for immigrant women of color who seek to uplift themselves through a college education. A sense of collective responsibility for social change is a crucial piece of this process, as is bell hook's description of the value of a community of resistance (hooks, 1990). Women of color who have been shut out, silenced, othered, and otherwise discounted can, through achieving positive marginality, recognize the margin as a space of creativity and power.

### **Specific Research Questions**

The study addressed the following overarching question: How do the social categories of gender, class, race, and nationality operate in Caribbean immigrant women's experience of being college students? Within this question, a number of nested questions were explored in the data:

- I. When women move, in what ways do they develop ways of living that accommodate and/or reject societal assignments of roles? To what extent do the meanings and values of gender shift when women cross cultures, and intersect with race, class, and nationality to shape women's lives in the new country?

- II. In what ways do differences and similarities -- between women, between Black women and men, and among Black women -- interact with social attitudes and structural forces in cultural relocation?
- III. To what extent does the construct of positive marginality describe Caribbean women's response to their experiences as immigrant college students?
- IV. What specific challenges do Caribbean immigrant women in college experience? What personal, social and cultural resources do Caribbean immigrant women in college mobilize to facilitate their progress?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Method**

This study used qualitative methods to conduct a multilevel inquiry whereby the interplay between individual agency and the social structure may be understood, particularly as it influences the experiences of immigrant women of color within higher education.

### **Participants**

Twenty-seven English-speaking Caribbean-born female college students participated in the study. Participants were students at two undergraduate colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY): 16 attended Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn and 11 attended Hunter College in Manhattan. Participants' mean age was 28 years old, with 45% of the group being between 26 – 46 years old; fifteen women were the traditional college age of 18-25 years old.

The national composition of the participants is representative of the overall Caribbean student population at the two colleges. Nine participants were from Trinidad, six from Jamaica, and four from Haiti; altogether, participants from these countries represented 70.4% of the total group. Other participants were from Dominica and St Vincent (2 from each country) and from St. Kitts, Barbados, Guyana and Grenada (1 participant each). This is consistent with institutional data that shows the largest number of English-speaking Caribbean-born students attending CUNY undergraduate colleges being from Trinidad, Jamaica and from Haiti, respectively (CUNY Facts, 2001)

About 80% of the group immigrated between the ages of 18 – 33 years old; only 22.2% of participants immigrated before age 18. The average length of time participants

had been in the US was 6.2 years, with the longest time since immigration being 17 years and the most recently-arrived participant having been in the US for less than a month. Approximately 66% of the group reported being US residents or US citizens; the other participants held F1 visas (i.e., were international students). Of those students who identified themselves as US residents, the researcher did not attempt to distinguish between those who were documented (i.e., *green card* or *alien registration card* holders) and those who were undocumented (*illegal aliens*). Four participants had lived in another country prior to living in the US.

Prior to immigration, 48% of participants had completed high school only, 41% had some college or vocational training, and 7.4% had completed college. Less than 4% (2 participants) had not completed high school before moving to live in the US. Of the 11 participants who had transferred college credits from another institution, 6 transferred credits from an overseas college, 3 transferred credits from US community colleges and 2 persons transferred credits from other US undergraduate colleges. At the time the data was collected participants had been attending the institutions for an average of five semesters.

### **Procedure**

Methods of recruitment included posting fliers and handing them out on campus, attending meetings of Caribbean student groups, approaching students on campus to invite participation, and snowballing. When students indicated an interest in participating in the study, they were asked for contact information, and assigned an appointment for a focus group meeting (See detailed selection criteria below). Full participation comprised reading and signing a consent form, completing a short questionnaire, and participation in

either a focus group only, or a focus group and an individual life story interview. Focus group participants and life story interviewees were paid \$15 and \$40 compensation, respectively.

A Jamaican-born woman who recently graduated from Hunter College provided assistance in recruitment and facilitating some focus groups. The principal investigator conducted all focus groups, personal interviews, data analysis and writing. The principal investigator transcribed the first two focus groups; four paid transcribers, three of whom were Caribbean-born, transcribed recordings of the remaining focus groups and individual interviews.

### **The Sites**

The City University of New York (CUNY), is the nation's largest urban university and comprises eleven senior colleges, located throughout the five boroughs of the City of New York. Two coeducational CUNY senior colleges, Medgar Evers College and Hunter College, were selected as sites for the study because of their contrasting history, size, and location, and for their different merits in serving a diverse urban student population.

Located in Manhattan, Hunter College was founded in 1870 by Irish immigrant and social reformer Thomas Hunter and is reputed to be one of CUNY's premier senior colleges. Students come from 48 countries, speak some 40 languages, and more than half of the undergraduates are members of minority groups. The college faculty consists of approximately 1,100 full- and part-time instructional staff members who teach in the more than 80 undergraduate, 60 graduate, and 10 joint BA-MA programs. Grants and awards totaled more than \$23 million for the 1996-97 fiscal year.

Medgar Evers College was founded in 1969 as a result of collaborative efforts by community leaders, elected officials, the Chancellor, and the Board of Trustees of The City University of New York. The youngest of the CUNY four-year colleges, MEC was established to serve the educational, cultural and social needs of a multinational community located in the Crown Heights section of central Brooklyn. The college, named in honor of slain civil rights activist Medgar Wiley Evers, maintains a reputation for fostering a pan-African campus identity. The college offers both baccalaureate and associate degrees, and has approximately 400 full- and part-time instructional staff members. Currently, grant funding to the college is approximately \$7 million.

Together, the varying features of these two colleges provided a broad context against which to assess institutional, social and environmental influences on students' progress toward their degrees and the ways in which their college experiences interacted with the larger contexts of their lives.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

#### **Questionnaire:**

Once they indicated their consent, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire [Appendix C] in which they provided general background information (e.g., age, educational background, income level, marital status).

#### **Focus Groups:**

Four focus groups were conducted on each campus, totaling eight focus groups conducted. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours (including ½ hour for

signing the consent form [Appendix A], instructions, and completing the questionnaire) and was tape-recorded. Assorted drinks and snacks were provided.

This methodological approach allowed the researcher to take seriously the influence of the social context in the construction of meanings and identities, and enabled observation of women interacting with other women who are facing similar challenges as first-generation immigrants in college (Wilkenson, 1998). The discussions were open-ended, yet guided to include discussion of the following themes: negative and positive aspects of their educational experiences: access to institutional support; interactions with faculty and peers; attitudes of family, friends and partners toward their studies; juggling multiple roles (e.g., mothering, work, church, community, extended family) [See Appendix D for focus group discussion guide].

#### Life Story Interviews:

Two women from each site (four women altogether) were selected to participate in life history interviews. Women were selected to vary according to the length of time they had been in the US, their country of origin, and the nature of their life experiences. Interviews were scheduled for a mutually convenient time and place and were tape-recorded.

The main purpose of the life story interviews in this study was to allow for evaluation of the trajectory of individual women's resistance and resilience in education and in other areas of her life (Massey, Cameron, Ouellette & Fine, 1998). The unstructured, in-person, one-on-one interview was used to probe into an individual woman's lived experiences, to understand her motivations, contexts and meanings. This

served to investigate the significance of her educational pursuits, as they related to her overall life.

The interview included, but was not limited to, discussion of the following topics: circumstances leading to immigration; the role of education in her plans for the future; the impact of her educational pursuits on other aspects of her life; her perception of the relationship between her status as an immigrant woman of color and the difficulties she faces in pursuing her educational goals; and the influence of her social networks, neighborhood attachments and cultural moorings on the strategies she develops to deal with these difficulties. [See Appendix B for consent form; Appendix E for interview schedule]. Interviews were scheduled for a mutually convenient time and place and were tape-recorded.

### **Data Analysis & Interpretation**

Prior to data collection, a preliminary list of data codes was generated based on the theoretical framework and research questions [see Appendix F]. This list of data codes directed the construction of the focus group and interview guides. As data collection progressed, minor adjustments were made to the discussion guides to render the questions appropriate for the participants in each site.

After the first two focus groups were conducted, data collection, transcription and processing ensued concurrently. The processed data was analyzed using content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Massey, Cameron, Ouellette & Fine, 1998). Data analysis proceeded as follows: The transcripts were first read in an open-ended way, and themes listed as they emerged [see Appendix G for codes

representing dominant themes in the data]. These themes were sorted and merged with the preliminary data codes to yield a list of amended data codes. Then transcripts were mined in two directions: first, for nested meanings and sub codes within the dominant data codes, and second, for comprehensive themes to use as grouping elements for the coded data. These comprehensive themes of *gender negotiation*, *community/exclusion* and *marginalization/positive marginality* were then used as the organizing framework within which patterns and variance were identified. The comprehensive themes were subsequently as section headings for presenting the findings.

Using the computer program, ATLAS Ti, codes were assigned to the comprehensive themes (*gender negotiation*, *community/exclusion* and *marginalization/positive marginality*), and then the material was sorted to identify theoretically meaningful groupings within the data. During this process, a further organizing strategy was to re-assign certain dominant data codes that were inextricable from other codes in the data to be used as cross-cutting elements within the comprehensive themes. For example, race, social class, relationships and ethnicity were data codes that were found to filter through the comprehensive themes. Rather than artificially isolating these, they are presented within each of the comprehensive themes to illustrate the way they intersect with diverse aspects of the phenomena under investigation – all of which are significant. Consistencies and inconsistencies with the theoretical framework were examined and noted. Also, those instances where the existing theory does not adequately capture the experiences of this group were noted and theorized

The main focus of the analysis was to examine the multidimensional nature of the constructs and to examine interrelationships between and within their elements (Becker, 1992). The unit of analysis for the focus group data was the group (i.e., Caribbean immigrant students); for the life-story data, which yielded the portraits of two women, the unit of analysis was the individual. Comparisons between sites, or among groups or individuals was not a methodological strategy deliberately engaged in this study, however, variations and similarities between the sites and individual women are presented throughout the findings. That is, at times the group level analysis was not sufficient to represent variations in the data, at which point it was necessary to point out convergence and divergence between the sites or among individuals. This strategy was only employed when the data indicated its necessity and when it was theoretically meaningful to do so.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Findings**

The overall project, a study of Caribbean immigrant women in US colleges, allows a close look at persons who fall within this social category defined by their gender, race, nationality, social class, and occupation. The goal of the study was to determine the nature of the experience of crossing cultures and pursuing a college education, and the data demonstrate how membership in this socio-cultural group shapes the experience and influences how the experience is viewed by the participants themselves.

This interpretation of experience takes place simultaneously on two related planes – at the group level and at the individual (personal) level. The perceptions that gave rise to the data, although individual level activity, are fueled and directed by the nature of participants' social interactions -- their experiences with and as members of a social category in relatively new, diverse, social settings. Similarly, social influence operates in the other direction, whereby participants' perceptions of their college experiences have bearing on their social encounters. Hence, the findings of this study are organized to first depict the experience of Caribbean immigrant women pursuing a college education in the US using the group as the analytical frame, with the final section portraying the experience from the individual level. A summary of each section follows:

#### **I. Rules of Gender: Discrimination and Tradition**

When women move to the US they come from cultural traditions that determined their social roles in the Caribbean and for most women, these rules continue to operate in the US. Gender roles and traditions are not homogenous throughout the Caribbean,

hence, there is variation in the ways in which these affect women's experiences in the US. Further, in light of increased cultural contact, television, and globalization, the boundaries between Caribbean traditions and US traditions have become less distinct. This section details these gender discrepancies and describes how they affect participants' college pursuits and other aspects of their lives.

## **II. Experiencing Difference, Seeking Community: Reinforcing/Revising Racial, Panethnic and National Identities**

Being from the Caribbean, from a particular country, female, a college student, living in a certain neighborhood, and being a mother, are social roles and contexts that provide different communities in which participants may claim membership. This section presents data that demonstrate how nested, overlapping and unrelated social sites shape identity and exclusion for these participants and conversely, how their identity determines the social settings and categories of belonging they select.

## **III. Reconsidering the Margin**

Caribbean women who live in the US are non-traditional college students and members of historically marginalized social groups. This section presents findings on the extent to which participants perceive themselves to be marginalized and how they deal with their perceptions. Here, the social categories to which they belong – race, class, nationality and gender -- are discussed as complex sites of potential marginality. The theoretical framework of positive marginality has been used to organize this analysis, in an effort to assess the adequacy of this concept for capturing this group's response.

#### **IV. Portraits**

This closer look at individual women is geared towards understanding the motivations, fears, challenges and triumphs that characterize the experience for particular women. Since the circumstances of leaving home are not the same for everyone, this personal analysis captures various background factors that propelled the women to migrate to the US. This level of analysis also shows the characteristics of persons who, having made the journey from the Caribbean to live in the US, elected to pursue a college education despite the difficulties of achieving this goal.

**I****Rules of Gender: Discrimination and Tradition**

*But it is not a good feeling to know that people judge you just because you're a woman.*

*Focus Group Participant, February 26, 2002*

The poignant statement above could be spoken in the language or dialect of almost any country and still find resonance in the women of that country, and indeed, throughout the world. Historically, women have faced global inequities and continue to contend with many of the same injustices today. However, despite the persistent inequities and injustices that accompany being judged inferior, patriarchy is not an effective leveler of women's differences. While all women share in gender oppression, the forms of oppression and its consequences vary among women, depending on the positions they occupy within structures of race, class, and sexuality, and all the other ways in which women are different from each other (Lorde, 1984; Cole, 1998). Cole argues it is necessary to address differences among women while discussing our commonalities if we are to be accurate in accounts of women's lived experiences and be mindful of the multiple other categories into which women of a particular group might fit.

Advocating a global analysis of Black women's experiences, Collins (2000) uses the term "transnational matrix of domination" to describe how patterns of intersecting oppressions may be organized differently from society to society, and still retain their challenging effects. When Caribbean women immigrate to the US, the matrix of

domination they experienced at home shifts, but is not completely erased by the matrix that is the local reality of Black women in the US. Since formal education is one of the “social institutions that regulate the actual patterns of intersecting oppressions that Black women encounter” (Collins, 2000; p.228), this study’s focus on Caribbean women’s experiences as college students yields valuable insights into the complex nature of women’s experience of patriarchy within particular social structures. While the women in this study are bonded to each other and to women worldwide by many of their concerns, their experiences vary in many ways that are basic to who they are as members of this group and as individuals.

In this study, gender themes were hard to untangle from themes of race, class and cultural identity. Consistent with Hedge’s (1998) claim that “the experience of being an immigrant woman of color from the Third World in the United States is not one that can be described or analyzed in independent parts” (p. 37), I found participants’ discussion of how they experienced immigration as women to be set among interconnected concerns. These findings demonstrate that immigrant women negotiate intersecting structures, and that their gender-related concerns are linked to a wide range of experiences that overlap with their experiences as college students. Further, the current findings mirror Hedge’s notion that traditional, patriarchal notions of women’s roles are further complicated by United States discourse on race, class and gender.

The CUNY colleges from which I recruited participants have majority female student enrollment. At Hunter College, 69.7% of the students enrolled in 2001 were women; at Medgar Evers College, 78.2% women enrolled in 2001(CUNY Facts, 2001).

Across the two campuses, participants were consistent in not being self-conscious about being women on campus:

Tracy: Now what about being a woman or woman of color on campus here, do you think that affects the experience here? Are there any advantages or disadvantages to your student experience here?

A\_\_\_\_: I don't see any.

N\_\_\_\_: So far, they have been treating us equally. So I really don't have any experience concerning my advantage or my disadvantage.

[P3: MEC 11\_14\_02 - 3:1]

At Hunter College, participants commented on the student population, as follows:

Tracy: All right. Let me ask you this, are you more conscious of yourselves as Caribbean women on campus?

L\_\_\_\_: Noooo

M\_\_\_\_: As compared to? As opposed to?

Tracy: As opposed to maybe in the neighborhood, on the train, or before you came here?

M\_\_\_\_: It's hard to pin down the demographics in Hunter because somebody asked me what type of school is Hunter? Is it majority--?

L\_\_\_\_: No, Majority women

T\_\_\_\_: But that comes from the whole idea that Hunter was once an all-girls school.

L\_\_\_\_: Hunter is majority women. That's it.

T\_\_\_\_\_: That's the only thing it is a majority of.

[P7: HC 2\_26\_02 and 3\_01\_02 Pt I – 7:3]

In this context, participants did not speak of experiencing the explicit gender discrimination that characterizes the college experience of some female students elsewhere. However, participants' reports that their gender did not overtly affect them in classrooms or on the campuses did not mean their college experience was removed from their status as Caribbean-born women of color. In addition to talking at length about how their gender related to their race and ethnicity within the context of US higher education, they also discussed ways in which traditional gender roles influenced their immigration experience and where they struggled to re-define themselves in America. Some of these experiences reveal universal gender traditions, while others relate to culture-specific gender traditions. Illustrative of the ways in which these women's lives as US college students are interwoven with their other roles, while we discussed college, women spoke of their lives as single women or women in relationships, as immigrant mothers and as mothers who gave birth to first-generation Americans, as women who work, and as women of African ancestry. These themes have been used to organize the following sections in which I present the findings on the role gender plays in influencing the experiences of Caribbean immigrant women in college.

### **Gender and Tradition:**

Tradition, the handing down of beliefs, legends, and customs from generation to generation, is of particular interest in the context of immigration. When a woman leaves

her country of origin to live in another, there is a large part of her home country that remains with her. Some of this exists as a latent memory that seldom has direct bearing on her daily routine; other aspects of home are more dominant and these direct her choices as she creates a life away from home. In the same way that there is no one way in which traditions are manifested across generations, neither is there any way to predetermine what traditions will persist when one leaves one's country of origin. What immigrant women do have in common, however, is that when they move to the US they have to contend with the traditions of their home country as well as those where they now live.

Beyond being from the same geographical region, Caribbean people have similarities in customs, culture and outlook that link them as an ethnic group. Despite the undeniable heterogeneity that distinguishes Caribbean countries from each other and the diversity within each country, critical shared histories and experiences have forged strong cultural links across the nations. This is true throughout the English, French, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, although ease of communication and varying colonial influences have resulted in more similarities within than across those language subgroups. However, regardless of country of origin, women who leave the Caribbean to live in the US carry with them memories, beliefs, and customs that uniquely define them as Caribbean women:

When you talk about tradition, I'm talking how my parents grow me, that's what I call tradition, how my parents grow me and how I came out. I'm talking the tales that my grandmother used to tell me that I can pass on to my kids. Because those to me are the fundamental things that you instill in your child that they'll never

forget, you know because it's so easy to get side tracked in this country, it is so easy.

[P6: HC 2\_20\_02 - 6:5]

Studies of immigrant groups with such strong traditional values show that some of the values immigrants hold onto are no longer as meaningful in the home country, where traditions have been reshaped by changes in values across generations and by external cultural influences (Hedge, 1998). There are, however, some traditional gender values that are resistant to change. Some of these values serve to uniquely define the experience of being a woman from a particular country; others seem to have been written by a universal hand and shape the experiences of all women, regardless of their cultural origins.

As women who were born in the Caribbean and are pursuing a college education in the United States, participants in this study embody an interesting mixture of holding on to traditional values and carving out new values for themselves. Although participants demonstrated a clear sense of what their traditional roles were, some women were critical of the relevance traditional roles had for their lives today.

Tracy: So let me ask you something a little bit more on the personal side, would you say that you are traditional women compared with other women of your culture? Are you traditional women or non-traditional women?

A\_\_\_\_: Meaning?

Tracy: Meaning, do you carry on a lot of the codes and the cultural practices and beliefs of the women of your culture—like your mother's generation and

your grandmother [N\_\_\_\_ laughs] or are there things that you don't think are important any more?

N\_\_\_\_: [laughing] I am not carrying the grandmother thing. The mother I am following some of that, [A\_\_\_\_: Right] but now, since the new generation, the millennium and everything -- forget it, I am doing my own thing, shoot. Because I am certain what my mother used to do then, I am not going to do it now, but I am doing my own thing. I am sure that what I am doing now she will never do it, so which is that, hey, everybody do their own whole new thing, you know. That's what I am saying. I am carrying some of my mother and continue to do my own.

S\_\_\_\_: Because being here and then, like you call it, the millennium or 21st century, you cannot act like you're living in a different world, you know, back in the 18th century, in fact you have to be ... [A\_\_\_\_: Up to date] Yeah, up to date.

[P3: MEC 11\_14\_02 - 3:1]

For these women, their current social and temporal contexts demand of them a more modern approach to their lives. There is no ready-made way to live the lives they are living, with loyalties to home, school, work and family – all in a new country. Across the groups, few women described themselves as being traditional, although it was clear that no one was completely ready to turn their backs on the traditional influences. However, some women were resolute that nothing less than the traditional way was going to do:

A\_\_\_\_: I'd say I'm traditional.

Tracy: You're traditional?

A\_\_\_\_: Yeah, I kinda hold on to my past.

Tracy: O.K.

A\_\_\_\_: About what my parents taught me, and what they say is what they learned from before. It's kinda like I was also grown in a— I was grown sheltered. My parent's sheltered me, and my father always sat me down and like, [taught] me a lot of stuff. That's why I didn't allow this culture to suck me in. I kept all my culture with me, and that's something I say I'm going to put into my-- I don't care, that's something I'm going to instill in my kids. That's why I make it my business right now that my son knows where I came from, what I had to go through. My parents—my father had four pants, four pants for years, because it's a struggle, you understand. And like she said, some people they come here they don't want to eat the simple food from home or something? Tell the honest truth, I cook my food and I walk with it, because that's just me. I'm not going to give up my culture. I'm not going to give up what I learned, and I'm going to pass it on to my kids and my grand kids if I could. I don't want to be sucked in like a lot of people are sucked into American life. I don't want that.

[P6: HC 2\_20\_02 - 6:5]

For this woman, holding on to traditional values and practices were a form of paying homage to her parents in recognition of all they had gone through to make life for

their children. Her parents' efforts are embedded in her understanding of her culture and so there is no retaining her culture without the memory of their struggle. For her, maintaining tradition means that the sense of her parents' reality and their values are kept with her and passed on to her children. For other participants, what it meant to be traditional was complicated by the reality of daily living in the US. As these women negotiated various social demands, some deviation from the ways of the home country did not detract from their ability to consider themselves traditional:

A\_\_\_\_: I am traditional.

Tracy: What are some of the things that you hold on to that are important?

A\_\_\_\_: My culture, like the way—uhm, how would I say that? In Haiti we have so many holidays that I still respect, then at Christmas usually—back in Haiti I used to go to church every Sunday, here because I go to work it's hard for me to do it. But I used to go to church on Christmas—You were expected to go to church on Christmas Day, New Year's day, I still do these things and what else? I live on my own—I mean I don't have anybody to follow it's just myself, but I still do the same things that my mother would do. ... I mean, once you come here it's hard to try to keep up with your culture but I still do. Only one thing, let me give you an example. Back in the day even though I didn't have a good relationship with my father, I would still write him or talk to him on the phone, but now I don't. I don't care. If I see him I'll say hi to him. But now I feel like I don't have to because it's different, I don't live in Haiti no more.

[P3: MEC 11\_14\_02 - 3:1]

This participant describes herself as being a traditional woman, because she tries to reproduce traditional practices in her daily life. However, she admits there is at least one aspect of her life that does not reflect traditional values – respect for one’s parents. Indeed, unquestioning and enduring respect for parents is a common tenet in Caribbean households. Deference to one’s parents is ingrained during childhood and extends into adulthood. This regard for parents is an example of a traditional value that comes up against modern values as women come of age in America. The meaning “leaving home” takes on for immigrants, further complicates the already charged developmental phase of transitioning to adulthood.

One thorny task in this transition is figuring out just what “home” one is leaving. Apart from the actual physical home of their parents or influential others, leaving home introduces the threat of leaving one’s traditions behind. In the focus groups, women discussed how this tension between traditional and modern values was influencing their choices. In some cases, women were critical of what they had seen in their families and did not want to reproduce those traditions in their own future.

Tracy: ... Because in our parents’ day—

L\_\_\_\_: --that’s the way they were.

Tracy: Exactly.

L\_\_\_\_: Everybody knew their roles.

Tracy: Exactly. You knew your role. What were the roles?

T\_\_\_\_: The women belong in the house, stay home with the kids. Because of that my grandmother did not get to go to school. She went so far as all-age

[school] because her mother thought that she is not going to waste her time on no gal pickney because gal pickney just a go get pregnant and whatever, whatever.

L\_\_\_\_: True

T\_\_\_\_: Which I think is ridiculous because a lot of women here, they get pregnant and they go along ... But my grandmother did not get to go to school and my grandmother is one smart woman.

L\_\_\_\_: Yes

T\_\_\_\_: But it is not a good feeling to know that people judge you just because you're woman.

[P8: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part II – 8:3]

The practice of not providing girls with an education beyond elementary level was widespread in Caribbean societies in earlier days. Usually, education and skills training was reserved for boys while girls were trained in household duties, in preparation for becoming good wives. This was especially true in poor, rural communities where opportunities for secondary education were limited. Today, this is not the case. However, although Caribbean girls are not systematically being denied educational opportunities because of their gender, they have not been relieved of societal expectations about their domestic abilities:

L\_\_\_\_: My mother is like an on a cusp. So now I get mixed [messages] from her.

She will say, make sure you find this type of man, make sure you cook for him but make sure you do your education. So I'm like—[laughter]

M\_\_\_\_: Oh my God.

L\_\_\_\_: ...she is teaching me to get my education [Chorus: Right] but she is also saying, "Make sure you know how to take care of your man as well."

[Chorus: Yes, Right] I'm not saying you can't do both but you can't do both full-time.

[P8: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part II – 8:3]

This message is not only passed on from mothers to daughters but is pervasive among their peers. Women told stories of being assessed by their boyfriends based on whether or not they could cook. One woman said she actually resented her mother for having taught her to cook, because now she has to fulfill her boyfriend's expectations of her. When I pointed out to her that she does not have to cook, another participant responded, "But they expect it." All of this resentment could be avoided, they explained, if the men could be expected to share in household chores. And herein lies the problem:

L\_\_\_\_: In the Caribbean, we're trained to look after men, you know. We're not trained for them to look after us, or for them to look out for us, or for them to care for us, we're trained to care for them. So this is what they look forward to, for us to wait for them hand and foot. "Get me a beer" -- "Here honey." "Get me some food" -- "Here". [We] take it out, when they get to the table, put it there for them to eat. We're trained for that, Caribbean women, and it's different when you're here, like for women-- American women here, they won't do that. It's different.

Lo \_\_\_\_: ... They dominate, they think that they should be the number one figure, not the woman. So as she was saying, the Caribbean women they, they just take the back seat and let the men lead out. But now, it's like turned over, even more of the women are doing that than the men.

[P2: MEC 11\_17\_01 - 2:4]

As this focus group continued, we discussed the extent to which expectations of and for women were changing among Caribbean people, both those living in the US and those in their communities back home. The previous quote captures a difference in perspective among the women in this study: Some thought the Caribbean traditional gender values were still as patriarchal as they ever were. As one woman argued, she had seen no change in her family back home, all her female relatives still treated the men "...as if they're the king, or what." For her, any change in her attitude was due to the exposure she had gained from being in the US. Other women thought things were changing back home to reflect more equitable arrangements. As women discussed how they would like things to be different in their own lives, they agreed that for a relationship to work, "...it has to be reciprocal. It has to be a together thing, you and me. It can't be you do that and I'll do my thing on the side." [P2: MEC 11\_17\_01 - 2:4]. Similarly, in another group, women admitted to being traditional "to a certain extent", however, their ideals were changing:

V \_\_\_\_: I think because we are educated and more open now, we can stop the cycle and choose. Because I have chosen a lot of things that I want and leave out things that I don't want. You know, things that I find was unfair, you know, stuff like that. I said, my boys are gonna do everything in the

house. Girls the same thing. I'm not choosing work, you know, stuff like that—

M\_\_\_\_: --there has to be parity, equality between two people. This disparity thing it don't work no more.

Chorus: Yeah. Right.

I\_\_\_\_: I'm like this, you know, we have a fifty-fifty share. I work, go to school. You work, do whatever. When we come home ... in terms of cooking and cleaning, we share the responsibility. If you're not— if you can't do that — 'bye. [Laughs].

[P4: MEC 11\_14\_01 – 4:2]

Unfortunately, this may be more a reflection of their desires than their reality. No participant mentioned either having such a partnership herself or coming from a family background in which household responsibilities were not primarily the woman's domain. Based on these discussions it was clear that even though Caribbean women are now paid workers and professionals, they have added to (not replaced) their responsibility to the home and family. Gains Caribbean women have made in the public sphere have not offset domestic demands. Even in families who can afford to employ household and childcare help, it is the woman's duty to supervise these employees and ensure the smooth running of the household. When, in an effort to support her claim that Caribbean men were changing, one participant mentioned having seen stay-at-home dads, the group erupted in laughter. Stay-at-home dads, one woman countered, was "... basically an American thing." Another participant was more reflective but still uncertain:

I don't know if Caribbean men would ever stay at home with the kids ... I don't think we could ever try to change that. I don't think that would ever change with Caribbean men, staying at home with kids. But I'm not, I'm not going to say it may not, it's possible but, for the men-- yeah, I guess for the men that I've known, friends and personal -- I don't think... [P2 MEC 11\_17\_01 – 2:4]

As she struggles to give voice to the possibility that men may be playing a more significant role in domestic and childcare duties, she reveals how tenuous the idea is, in practice. However, the fact that participants were so vocal about their dissatisfaction is witness to social change in the making for this generation. Instead of being blindly resigned to the way things are, these women were conscious of the traditional imbalance toward patriarchal values. This awareness was evidenced by their strong critique and keen analysis of the implications of gender inequity:

M\_\_\_\_: Every time I hear women speak about relationships the only thing that really strikes me is that you know who the lucky ones are? Men. Because we tire ourselves out. And in the Caribbean to a certain extent, I think it is much more complex, the issue with women. We are matrifocal as a society because men were simply not there. So in terms of the children, the support, you know, family structure, it's really centered on the women but, but you are really talking about real power, political and also psychological power in the society. It really belongs to men.

[P8: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part II – 8:3]

As the data presented in this section illustrates, Caribbean women share a complex tradition of being strong mothers and women, yet continue to live with patriarchal values. Hart (1989) describes the dualistic family pattern in the Caribbean as follows: “A culture of male machismo is matched by recognition of women’s strength and responsibility for the family.” Coming from this heritage, some Caribbean women see American women as living lives with greater freedoms than theirs. The weight of their expanding responsibilities, the contrasting models they see around them in US society, and their increasing critical consciousness leads them to demand more of their relationships and to be less confined by traditional scripts. However, when they don’t like or admire what they see in US society, their experiences might also polarize them to retain familiar traditional values.

**Gender and Motherhood:**

Women in this study who were mothers contend with what every mother in modern societies has to deal with – how best to divide time that is never enough among all her various obligations. When our conversations turned to mothering, however, women spoke less about time concerns than I expected them to do. The pull of work and family responsibilities did not render their college commitments less important; neither did women voice any ambivalence about their decision to be students. In fact, there seemed to be among participants an uncompromising commitment to getting into school and getting the degree. This was especially clear in the case of one 24 year-old woman whose son was born when she was 19 years old and about to start college. While the group discussed freshman adjustment difficulties, her contribution gave us all pause:

My first semester was the worst but not because of that, because of my son. A newborn? Please. I was school, home, breast feed, back to school, back home.

‘Cause he refused to take a bottle. So in between each class— and then I had to drag him to school with me. So that posed a problem. So my whole first semester was a mess.

[P 6: HC\_2\_20\_02 6:1]

At that point in the discussion, I expressed my amazement that she did not delay starting college because she had a newborn. Without acknowledging what she had done was noteworthy, she went on to tell us how she got through that first semester when her plans for child-care fell through. With no one else available at home, she had to take her son to school with her. Her brother was a student at the same college and they alternated their schedules so they were not both in class at the same time. They completed the semester like that, taking turns to care for the fussy baby. When she had difficulty finding a place to breastfeed, her brother located the Caribbean Club, a space where she could feed her baby-- if not in complete privacy, then in relative comfort. Since the room had computers, she was able to work on assignments in between classes while her son napped. This is not a typical day in the life of the “traditional” American college student. Further, the tenacity portrayed in this woman’s story is not represented in the master narrative that is used to describe young single mothers of color (Romero and Stewart, 1999).

If mothering can be placed on a continuum to demonstrate how mothers’ concerns do not necessarily lessen but change in nature as their children get older, then there was

one participant whom I would place at the end of the continuum opposite to the participant I just mentioned. This 44 year-old woman described herself as a “full-time wife and mother” throughout her college experience. She has two grown daughters who are also students at the college she was attending. She had completed all the credits necessary for a degree but was taking some additional classes that she thought would make her more competitive on the job market. The added benefit of being there for an extra few semesters, she explained, was that her and her two daughters would be together in the graduation procession.

This participant joined the group late, so she missed my preamble in which I told participants we would be talking about negative and positive aspects of their college experience, among other things that affect them as Caribbean immigrant women. When she joined the group, I told her we had just been discussing the challenges of attending college and asked her if she wanted to jump in:

Yes, certainly! I have a lot to say ... You know that ‘challenge’, I turned that challenge into something positive. Because ‘challenge’ for me was too hard. It was just making everything worse.

[P2: 11\_17\_01 2:5]

She did have a lot to say and it was important for her to be able to speak from the wealth of experience she had amassed in her various roles over the years. As this group discussion progressed, she functioned as a voice of wisdom and caution, tempering the younger students’ often angry and impatient critique of the many lines they had to walk as they pursued the degree. In her life she was countering the narrative framework I was

facilitating – that of the nontraditional student being “challenged”. To think of her experience as a challenge was not a useful formulation for her, and so she had inverted the narrative into something manageable and productive for her. Did she face difficulties as a full-time wife and mother who worked full-time and was also a student? Absolutely. About those difficulties, she said,

There’s a lot, but it’s not important because this is my time, you know. When parents send children out and they take that time-- you know, sometimes we get children before we’re ready, right? Most of us. And you took that time out to focus on your kids, and that’s when we’ve got to come and claim that time, so I’m reclaiming that time now, you know, and that’s it. I’m really very happy.

[P2: MEC 11\_17\_01 – 2:6]

She saw herself as being in a good place: she had raised her children and seen them through college and she was about to get a college degree. She was now able to celebrate what she had accomplished for herself and her family. She got to that point by focusing less on the difficulties ahead of her and more on what was possible. The four other women in this focus group, whose ages ranged from 18 to 27 years old and who did not have children, did not share the benefit of her vantage point and had not yet experienced her particular sense of satisfaction.

All mothers who participated in the study were concerned about how to raise children in America, whether their children were born in the US or were born in their home countries and were now living in the US. Even those participants who were not mothers were able to connect with the dilemma of immigrant-parents: how to pass

traditional values of home to their children while raising them in America. They were clear about the importance of retaining the cultural values of their home countries but pondered together about how much was enough. Also, they shared a deep concern for figuring out how to facilitate their children learning beneficial values, while rejecting those they deemed undesirable.

N\_\_\_\_: The day that I do have my child I will not raise that child the same way other people are raising a child up here.

S\_\_\_\_: Yes but sometimes even you say that but you-- it's not-- you're going have to—

N\_\_\_\_: You heard that word called laissez-faire, I am not going to let it do. I am not going to let it happen. Because my mother ... in the house she still keeps the customs, the same things. The Haitian parents when they grow up like this they still keep it.

A\_\_\_\_: Some of them, I mean you can't blame them because that's the way they were raised.

[P3: MEC 11\_14\_02 – 3:1]

The above quote is from a discussion about the importance of respect in Caribbean culture, in which participants commented on how they see children misbehaving in public, something they or their siblings could never do. At home, parents lay down strict guidelines for appropriate behavior, which are reinforced with “one look” in public. One participant gave the example of her brothers, aged five and twelve years old, who got in trouble for unruly behavior on the street even when their mother was not

around. If someone was in the area who knew their mother, she would eventually learn of the incident and they would be punished. This type of community participation in childrearing is a common practice among people of the Caribbean, especially for those from rural areas. One benefit for immigrants to the US who now live in areas populated by other Caribbean people is that they get to reproduce that sense of community within the enclave, knowing that this is not necessarily how all people live in American society.

I find that this country is so full of separateness; this is what this country is basically all about. Now, first thing you have to teach your child is a sense of identity, I figure if you do that and you have a sense of identity and you have a family setting, a good family setting and a strong family background at home, there is nothing-- I'm not saying they won't deviate or they'll go and they'll do their stuff and whatever but they'll always come back, you know what I'm saying?

[P6: HC 2\_20\_02 6:5]

In this participant's opinion, a sense of self that is grounded in family and community was essential for countering the individuality that characterizes US society. However, a strong identity is not simply dispensed by the spoonful at breakfast. How, exactly, does one teach identity? In the immigration literature, children born overseas who are brought to the US are classified as first-generation immigrants; those who are born in the US to immigrant parents are classified as second-generation immigrants. Studies of immigrant identity have found differences between Black first- and second-generation immigrants (Waters, 1996). First-generation immigrants are more likely to

identify as Caribbean, West Indian, or to use their nation of origin as their identity label and second-generation immigrants are more likely to use a hyphenated identity label (e.g. Barbadian-American) or to identify as American. These studies do not provide any insight on what role parents have in the formation of these identities, or how parents feel about their role in this process.

In one focus group, three of the five participants were mothers, two of whom had both first- and second-generation immigrant children in each of their families. They were concerned about their decisions regarding the children, and the long-term effect of those decisions. For example, one mother had decided she was not going to be living in the US permanently so she sent her Jamaican-born children back home. However, her American-born nine-year-old son is “bright and good at sports” so she kept him here so “he can have certain opportunities”, at least until it is time for him to go to high school. After that, she’s not sure she wants him to stay here. If she does decide to move back to Jamaica, she wonders, “... am I depriving him of his heritage and everything?”

This mother’s concern about the pros and cons of keeping her son here versus sending him back to Jamaica extend beyond his entitlements as a US citizen. Her tentative plan to send him home when he gets to high school age is not arbitrary: Many Caribbean-born people are of the opinion that children get a better quality high school education in the Caribbean than that which is available in New York City public high schools. Another commonly held belief is that children raised in the Caribbean are less prone to disciplinary problems than those raised here. As the two mothers continue the discussion, the larger context of their dilemma becomes clear:

V\_\_\_\_: My daughter, she went to Bishop's [High School, in Trinidad] and she really got a good education over there. I knew she wouldn't have gotten that here, unless I had money to send her to a private school or something like that. And the attitudes and stuff that they pick up here, it's a lot worse. You know, so now I'm debating [sending my son back home for high school] but I can't have my son grow up without me so, it's like, you know, what to do? I'm debating that.

B\_\_\_\_: I have the same problem. If I had someone to take care of my son, very well in Jamaica -- my other kids are grown ... I would let him stay there-

V\_\_\_\_: But growing up without you is, is not good.

[P4: MEC 11\_14\_01 – 4:3]

It is not uncommon for Caribbean mothers living in the US to send their children back home where close community ties and family network provide them with more supervision than the mother is able to offer while pursuing her goals. The added advantage of what parents consider to be a superior education, based on the content area covered and higher standard of discipline in Caribbean high schools, is a major consideration in making this decision. When all goes well, children pass through adolescence and into young adulthood in the relatively structured environment their parents grew up in. During which time, it is hoped they gain a strong identity -- as individuals and as Caribbean young people. However, as is illustrated in the above excerpt, mothers are torn between wanting the benefits of home for their children and knowing the potential difficulties associated with not having their children with them.

Mothers whose American-born or foreign-born children are living in the US are also concerned with finding ways of instilling in their children a strong identity that is infused with a sense of where they came from:

I make it my business, every vacation my son has, even if I don't get vacation ...every Christmas, every summer, my son goes [to St. Vincent]. I want him to learn my history. I mean, I say to him, "You're Vincentian," he refuses. He's like, "I'm not Vincentian, I'm American" He's like, "That's my flag, that's your flag." You know, but I have to work with him because the schools are brainwashing him. That's the problem. They're brainwashing my poor baby.

[P 6: HC 2\_20\_02 - 6:4]

There was a strong interest in transmitting tradition to their children that was evident among the mothers in this study. However, there are some elements of their cultural background that women did not want passed on to their children:

B\_\_\_\_: ... As women, or our parents, we don't teach little boys how to respect little girls but we teach little girls how to come up and prepare to be a wife and a mother. We have to learn how to cook, and wash, and to be respectful to our husbands and what have you ...

V\_\_\_\_: And then how about back to the parents too, how they raise the boys. Because I know for me, my mom was guilty of that but she took it from her parents and passed it down. She treated the girls completely different; the boys were like kings—

G\_\_\_\_: Yeah, they get away with everything

B \_\_\_\_: Uh hm

V \_\_\_\_: -- did nothing in the house and the girls did everything. They pass that down and it's not right.

B \_\_\_\_: It's a cycle that has to be broken.

[P4: MEC 11\_14\_01 – 4:2 ]

Overall, the group spoke of tradition as comforting for them and discussions resonated with an enduring yearning for familiar aspects of their home and upbringing. However, their desires were selective: Women wanted to take an active role in interrupting the transmission of traditional values that had not supported their development. While they might have been raised in a culture of patriarchal values, they did not want to reproduce these oppressive structures for their children.

### **Gender and Work:**

Caribbean women who immigrate to the US and attend college are usually classified as non-traditional students: They are first-generation college students, are older than the average college student, and many have families and jobs. Therefore, multiple obligations define the quality of the college experience for Caribbean students. Even those students who work have to maintain a full-time course load in order to satisfy financial aid requirements. This balancing act of work, school and family obligations makes it difficult to participate in group-work and research activities, and precludes attending extra-curricular activities such as student clubs, and college-wide programs that inform and/or entertain:

I am trying to get the hell out of this place. I'm tired of paying them money. Plus, I'm working full-time so I have no time to be in the club. So I'm like school, and as soon as class is finished I have to go to work and I work straight through till night. So the time to hang out is not there, because it's school, work, home.

[P6: HC 2\_20\_02 6:1]

Most Caribbean students, including those who had post-secondary or professional training in their home countries, do not yet have the US academic credentials most employers require. Caribbean women, therefore, find it easiest to find employment as household help, nannies, and caretakers of the elderly. They also work in the lower levels of the healthcare, foodservice and hospitality industries. The college students who occupy these jobs often endure severe hardships but see these jobs as the stepping-stones to achieving their aspirations:

My first job, I got it after four weeks when I came up here, as a baby-sitter for this family who treated me horribly. I had to cook, clean, wash, and look after 2 kids for \$250 a week, all right. For \$250 a week. I did that for 5 months, and I was like all right, all right, fine, I have to do it. All I kept saying to myself, I have to do this.

[P 2: MEC 11\_17\_01 - 2:1]

Working in this manner, in addition to juggling family and academic responsibilities, is a matter of economic necessity for these students, who are seeking upward mobility by way of the opportunities available in the US. Given the economies of

the countries they left, the money they earn here is more than they would at home, even when they work at menial, low-paying jobs that many Americans do not want.

If you do a random check of women pushing White babies in carriages, they really didn't come from that, and I think that ambition and drive and motivation to support their families back home is what brings them here in the first place.

[P 5: HC 2\_19\_02 5:1]

The US income-earning potential is a significant pull-factor for women from the Caribbean but it is not the only factor influencing this stream of immigration. An additional benefit is that they have access to college or some level of training, and a wider range of options than is available in their home countries:

I think that to me when you're at home, you just-- everybody's doing one thing, either teaching or working in the bank or whatever. That's the main difference.

Here, as a woman you get more choices. You get to go into business, be a doctor, you get to have lessons, do different things. And to me, when you go back home, you could go there and give back what you got. So you might go back home and open your own business-- be a businesswoman. Now you're a big thing. You're a big thing, you know?

[P2: MEC 11\_17\_01 2:2]

In turn, the US economy benefits from their presence, as do the women for whom they work:

People here want to earn their money. It is more valuable for a White female to work and pay minimum wages or better than minimum wages to Black females. So it is more cost effective to hire Black females without paying taxes or whatever they do, and the White females move ahead. But there're some clever Black females who do night work and study by day. I met a few of them, and they were on the Dean's List.

[P 5: HC 2\_19\_02 5:1]

Therefore, Caribbean women are making the best of a situation that is, in many ways, undesirable. For the most part, the jobs they have while in college are not their dream jobs, but these facilitate their long-term goals. Although the nature of the work they do may not be ideal, the fact that these jobs are available and pay enough for them to fulfill their financial obligations and attend school is an important consideration in how they view the quality of their experience as immigrant college students. For these students, the bottom line is that they will get a degree, so they do what they need to do to accomplish that goal.

**Gender and Race:**

In the relatively homogenous racial context of Caribbean societies, residents use fine-points such as shade of skin color, hair texture, other physical descriptors, and rural/urban and class distinctions to establish and maintain subgroups. However, in the racially charged US, the two major distinctions are White and non-White. The experience of living as an African descendant in a country where one is among the majority is, in

many ways, different from the experience of living as an African descendant where one is among the numerical minority. In the majority-Black context, one does not constantly think of one's Blackness in relation to others, since almost everyone else is Black. However, as the following quote illustrates, it does not take long for Caribbean immigrants to figure out how they are regarded in US society:

When you come up here its different because basically, you go out in the working world -- at least that's what my sister's been explaining to me. Out there, yes, they look at you as Caribbean, but you're Black, whether you like it or not, you're not White, you're just Black, you're a Black woman.

[P2: MEC 11\_17\_01 - 2:7]

This is not neutral labeling. Coming into a country expecting new worlds of opportunity, only to find that these are constrained by social categorizations is a hard lesson to learn. Further, for some Caribbean immigrants, embracing the Black racial identity is at odds with maintaining their ethnic and national identities. Those who are resistant to reconciling themselves with the Black identity inevitably find themselves in situations where they are forced to figure out where they fit into US society. I found that part of the learning that takes place in college, especially for newly-arrived Caribbean women, is discovering a new master status, their racial identity. This is illustrated in the following quote of a participant recounting a conversation between her and another student as they completed administrative forms:

There are a lot of mistaken identities and a lot of mishaps and misunderstandings because of what people think you are. A Guyanese girl, a student, was asking me

“What am I?” I was like, “Hello. You are Black, you are Caribbean, you are minority, and you are female. So if you do not know what you are, I am telling you what you are, and I am telling you what New York sees you as. So you better get used to being a little Black female.” She says, “But I am Indian and I am from Guyana.” I said, “You don’t know what you are. You’re Black, you’re not White. Therefore you are ... you said it!” She didn’t know. [P5: HC 2\_19\_02 - 5:3]

Given enough time and such illuminating experiences, Caribbean women who need to do so will undoubtedly learn their Blackness is the primary characteristic that defines them in the US. However, the question remains: how does being Black influence women’s experience as immigrant college students? In the context of discussing how immigrant women of color in the US are regarded as being Black and, in addition, female, one participant added, “That’s the next strike” [P2: MEC 11\_17\_01 - 2:7]. This quip is referring to the “three strikes – you’re out!” rule of cumulative defect and indicates they know that in the US, being Black and a woman is rarely a position of advantage.

The perspective around race and gender was not completely bleak, however, as some students had located an upside to being a woman of color on campus:

I would say, one advantage, in general, of being a woman of color is that they try to do this thing where they offer all these scholarships to minority students, and being minority and a woman is even better, especially in the sciences. This is how a lot of Black students get in, through the MARC program and stuff like that.

You're Black and you're a woman. And in the sciences, I can tell you there are not a lot of us out there. So for that reason, I would say that's one advantage.

[P6: HC\_2\_20\_02 - 6:3]

In this vein, students could either identify themselves as Black to take advantage of scholarship opportunities or they could be nationalistic to their own detriment. Of course, international students (i.e., those with student visa status) do not qualify for most fellowships. Of those students who would qualify based on their immigration status and academic standing, many were not aware of the funding opportunities available to them. At times the focus group discussions turned into information-sharing sessions during which students complained about the failure of the institution to publicize the opportunities they were now learning about from fellow students. Only the most savvy students applied for the scholarships – others either didn't know they existed or did not recognize the value of doing the extra work of applying for scholarships. Very few students were in the habit of scouring notice boards for offerings and even fewer mentioned having professors who advised them to apply for scholarships. And then there were those students who said they just did not have the time that fellowship applications required.

Applying for merit-based funding was one area in which participants demonstrated a critical consciousness of what it means to be part of a larger community of Black females in a US college. The same student who described funding opportunities as an advantage, commented on the accompanying price of being an award-winning student:

The disadvantage is that there are not enough of us. So when you excel in certain things a lot of people look at you. So there's kind of a pressure there because you don't want to fail. There's not a lot of you and you must really try to push yourself so that more of you can be in this area or something like that. So for that reason I think it's a bit of a disadvantage, just because the pressure and the stigma can get to your head if you let it. You feel like as a woman, you have to work harder to excel in a lot of things because we live in a male dominated society, that is one, and you're Black, that's two. So you feel that you have to try a little bit harder than the average guy and harder than the White person ... if you let it get to your head it can be a burden. [P6: HC 2\_20\_02 - 6:3]

Although institutions have put programs in place to increase the representation of women of color in higher education, such benefits are accompanied by heightened scrutiny and, in some cases, the inference that, despite financial and academic support, women of color will fail. Immigrant women of African ancestry who gain access to higher education today are claiming a legacy made possible by African Americans, in general, and in particular, by African American women. The burden this participant describes is not a new phenomenon; historically, this is what women of color have had to contend with in academic settings.

Experiencing a heightened awareness of what is expected of women of color in academic settings can lead Caribbean immigrants to develop a broadened racial identity, that incorporates a Black identity with their ethnic and national identities. As is fully discussed in subsequent sections (see Section II, Experiencing Difference, Seeking

Community & Section III, The Margin Reconsidered), there was evidence on both campuses of a consciousness of their membership in the larger Black community and the role it's history plays in their current experiences:

V\_\_\_\_: ... when I was in the Caribbean I used to think of myself as Caribbean, Caribbean, all the time. I know I'm Caribbean, but here it doesn't cross my mind. I'm just a Black person, you know.

Others: Yeah

V\_\_\_\_: When I just came, I used to feel like, you know, I don't belong. Like this is their country but now I feel that just like anybody else, I have the right just like anybody else. We all came here looking for something, so now, I'm more concrete now in how I think.

Tracy: So there's a shift. Back home you felt more Caribbean, but here—

V\_\_\_\_: I'm Black, I'm just Black

[P 2: MEC 11\_14\_01 10:00 am - 2:13]

Current theories of Black identity development do not explain the process of an immigrant adult of African ancestry incorporating a Black identity into her personal identity. Cultural variations in the experience of race leads to a recognition that there is no uniform way to account for the Black identity of people of African ancestry from the Caribbean, from Africa, and across the Diaspora. Cross' third stage of Black identity development – immersion -- is characterized by a strong desire to surround oneself with symbols of one's racial identity, and actively seek out opportunities to learn about one's own history and culture with the support of same-race peers (1991). Participants in this

study who pursued opportunities to gather with similar others to discuss Black issues found that it was difficult to agree, even within such groups, on what is important to Blacks.

For example, in one focus group participants mentioned a club on campus, Daughters of Africa, where students meet to discuss issues relevant to Black women. One participant described the purpose of the club as follows: “It’s really about reclaiming African consciousness, philosophies, you know, it’s a very good objective.” [P7: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part I – 7:1] Two participants said they had visited this club but they no longer attended the meetings. When I pressed for an explanation of why that club did not work for them, one woman told me she had gone to a meeting during Black History Month and the topic of discussion was African American women’s hair. She did not think this was an appropriate topic to dedicate her time and energy to, so she left the meeting and had not returned since then. Her comment sparked a heated discussion as the other participants challenged her judgment:

L\_\_\_\_: It’s such an important issue, it might seem trivial, but it’s an absolutely important issue.

M\_\_\_\_: It’s important.

T\_\_\_\_: To me, there are issues that need more attention than sitting down and discussing--

L\_\_\_\_: But do you know that the most important thing for Black people to learn is to love themselves?”

T\_\_\_\_: But, but I understand that--

L \_\_\_\_: But the basis for us learning to love ourselves T \_\_\_\_, you cannot build anything unless you put down the foundation, it a go drop down!

M \_\_\_\_: Exactly. You said it real good. You see because you don't understand, people don't understand, colonization -- which we have been through and we're still going through -- is not about the economic exploitation, you have psychological rape on a daily basis going towards Black people. So you want to tell me you walk into a room, and they're talking about the importance of loving ourselves as we are, and that gets you angry?

[P7: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part I - 7:1].

Even within the focus group, these women disagreed on the position they should take regarding discussing hair, an issue that is, for many women of African ancestry, loaded with political and psychological implications. This issue illustrates the larger point on political positioning and critical consciousness regarding race -- significant fissures remain among Black women, even among those who share histories of oppression based on race, class, or even nationality and cultural background.

### **Conclusion**

Findings presented in this section focused on the relationship between gender and traditional values for Caribbean immigrant women, the influence of gender on their roles as mothers, workers and as women of African ancestry, and how these relationships and influences impacted participants' aspirations, relationships and personal identities.

Although patterns in the data suggested these categories, which have been useful for the purpose of organization, what has also been demonstrated is how interrelated they are.

For example, when mothers discussed the perplexities of how to raise their immigrant children, they were considering how deeply to allow tradition to guide their parenting, especially since they were raising children of African ancestry in the US. Although I chose to present that shared dilemma under the heading, Gender and Motherhood, the discussion could easily have fit into one of the other sections in this chapter. Pulling the categories out of the context of the actual discussions, where the expression of ideas was a much more organic process, yields an artificial sense of order to the phenomena in focus. In reality, women's roles and social identities permeate each other and are altogether infused by the meanings associated with being female.

In addition to the intricate connectedness of women's social roles and identities, the findings highlight the nature of the issues with which women contend. Some of the issues women raised are immigrant specific and arise in the context of living away from one's home country. One such immigration-related issue is that of the emergent Black identity. Many Caribbean leaders today promote a Black national consciousness and the nations observe symbols in recognition of the universal African struggle. However, to be Black in the Caribbean is a very different identity experience than being Black in the US. The data illustrate how women contend with their evolving identity in the context of their lives as immigrant women. Other issues are culture specific, so these women would have had to deal with these issues even if they had never left their homes. For example, while Caribbean women are not the only cultural group still negotiating how many of the domestic chores automatically are her domain, traditional dictates have resulted in this being a larger problem for this group today than it is for many other cultural groups. Finally other issues, such as having to work harder than men for recognition and

compensation, are of universal concern to women. The findings illuminate the range and content of the issues faced by Caribbean immigrants as women pursuing a college education.

Another significant finding presented in this chapter is the resilience of the women in this group. Individually and as a group these participants portrayed tenacious and continuous strength. The community, home, and work are often contexts that are not supportive to women pursuing a college degree. That Caribbean women continue on this path at such high personal cost indicates the value of a college education to them and the extent to which they are willing to go to achieve it.

Besides being a reflection on their persistence, however, the findings require consideration of the larger context in which their experience as immigrant college students takes place. The economic challenges faced by 'developing' nations result in limited opportunities being available for Caribbean citizens in their home countries. Regardless of how bad the current US economy might be, the life in the US provides more routes to financial mobility than are readily available at home. Women who immigrate to the US believe a college degree enhances their chances of success, whether they plan to remain in this country or to return home.

Despite the constraints of tradition and the forms of discrimination that accompany being an immigrant woman from the Caribbean, college makes more possible. The findings illustrate the ways in which the roles and identities women carry infuse the college experience. Their experience stands, in many ways, in contrast to traditional college students and in other ways, in contrast to traditional Caribbean women.

In the next section, I present data on community: the various levels at which Caribbean immigrant women experience belonging and exclusion.

## II

### **Experiencing Difference, Seeking Community:**

#### **Reinforcing/Revising Racial, Panethnic and National Identities**

Imagine the following scenario: a Black woman gets off the subway train that she takes every day from Rosedale, Queens—a neighborhood heavily populated with Caribbean immigrants – to Manhattan’s Upper East Side, where she attends a public university. Contemplating the day ahead as she walks, she snaps back into the present as she notices a White woman walking briskly toward her. She assesses the situation, quickly stepping off the sidewalk and into the street to avoid the certain collision. Not fast enough; an entitled elbow smacks her upper arm. She turns to glare at the offender, who doesn’t meet her gaze but casts an annoyed glance at her own elbow without breaking her stride.

This is not fiction. I learned from focus-group participants who attend Hunter College, a public university located on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, that some variation of the above scenario takes place in their lives everyday. In one of the focus groups, this issue arose as one participant told us how she experienced her identity and sense of belonging being eroded upon moving to the United States:

M\_\_\_\_: It was hard. I was really questioning myself. I said to myself, Oh my God. It is not like I put it into words so much to myself as much as there was this really sinking feeling inside of me and I think what it was really-- my self confidence and self esteem, what it was based on was just shattered.

Chorus: uh huh

M\_\_\_\_: It was shattered because I wasn't this middle class girl from a certain society anymore. I was a Black girl. Before I opened my mouth nobody knew where the hell I was from. You know, I'm just a Black woman in America. That's it. They don't know how I got here, how long I've been here.

Chorus: That's true

M\_\_\_\_: And you know, one of the things that really was, was really-- it's kind of comical but it was actually disturbing to me and it is very, very trivial. The pace of walking. [outburst of agreement] I just couldn't get it. And walking on the street, I just couldn't get which side I was supposed to stick to now. Now, I know in the Caribbean we drive on the left [uh huh] and I'm walking and somehow I'm naturally gravitating to the left and everybody is doing the right and I keep bouncing into people and you know what, I was--

L\_\_\_\_: Disorientated

M\_\_\_\_: I'm telling you ... Because all these white women in Manhattan—

L\_\_\_\_: They walk right into you!

M\_\_\_\_: -- they were walking on me like I didn't exist. Somebody has to do some research on that.

L\_\_\_\_: It's true

M\_\_\_\_: I think it is a psychological thing.

L\_\_\_\_: They walk right into to you.

M\_\_\_\_: They walk into you and you're supposed to move. I was getting mauled down by these white women every minute.

L\_\_\_\_: I'm serious, they just walk past you. And men, they just walk right past you. I get it from everybody

M\_\_\_\_: I get it from the men too but they are more likely to move aside than the women.

L\_\_\_\_: Well for every white person that I'm walking up to, I have to be the one to come out of their way because they're not moving.

T\_\_\_\_: They know that's their place—

L\_\_\_\_: I've had them bounce me on my shoulder—

M\_\_\_\_: and they continue without even looking.

L\_\_\_\_: They don't even look back.

[P8: HC 2\_26\_02 and 3\_01\_02]

As participants compared stories, each account more unsettling than the preceding one, I had my own flashback to one unbearably hot day as I made my way towards the Port Authority bus terminal in bustling midtown. It soon became clear that wherever I placed my steps I was in someone's way. Tired of zigzagging, I came to a halt in front of a wisp of a woman with brown curly hair and honey highlights. I looked defiantly into her hazel eyes, waiting for her to step around me. "I have a cane" she said, having stopped in front of me. I looked down and she did, indeed, have a cane in her right hand. Not sure if it was menace or weariness I heard in her voice, I stepped to my right and continued my jagged path toward the bus.

Newcomers soon learn that New York City requires certain rules to keep the chaos orderly. Always walk on the right, for example -- on the sidewalk, in the department stores, in the halls, in passageways, and when entering and exiting the train. If you find yourself on the left on the escalators, you had better be climbing; NEVER just stand to the left. In the focus groups, we joked about the faux pas we committed as newcomers before we learned the rules. Then the mood turned somber as we testified to those situations in which we each had found ourselves a barely visible nuisance, even after we were sure we had mastered the rules. At one point, we turned outright raucous, as one participant told us how she found herself sitting in the lap of a White woman on the #6 train:

T\_\_\_\_: Well, I'm sorry, I'll be the bitch. [laughter] I went on a train and a white woman almost broke my hip. This is no joke. ... The woman who was fighting me over -- well, she looked like a business class woman, holding a seat for another woman. She came in and I'm about to sit but you know you look to make sure that the seat is empty and I'm about to sit down. The woman fly unda mi, I dropped in the seat and I bounced my hip and I turned around. I said, you guess what? I'm sitting down and I sat.

L\_\_\_\_: On her?

T\_\_\_\_: Oh yes.

[laughter]

T\_\_\_\_: I said, didn't you see me sitting here? Why you sitting down here? I said move over. I said move, you're not holding a seat. I said move over. She was looking at me like, you're stupid. I said, listen to me, you almost

broke my hip. I will sue your ass, move over. Everybody was looking at me like, this girl is stupid but you have to say something to them.

Everybody's standing up there like, okay she--

M\_\_\_\_: And they do those things all the time. On all those little levels and they get away with them.

[P8: HC 2\_26\_02 and 3\_01\_02]

We had laughed at our stories of naiveté, and now we laughed harder at this moment of defiance. However, participants knew these events were cause for outrage. They experienced these incidents in which they were treated as if they were not or should not be there as racially prejudiced disregard and they named it as such. Individual stories could have been interpreted as unfortunate, isolated incidents. However, in the group there was enough shared knowledge of such experiences that they knew exactly what was going on. No one felt the need to offer an alternative explanation. It is universal knowledge that the seat on the subway or bus belongs to the person closest to it. You yield to the elderly or infirm, but not to someone who acts like you are not there. For the foreign-born woman of color, part of adjustment includes figuring out, why are people acting as if she is not there?

Episodes such as those quoted above occur routinely outside the relative ethnic homogeneity of their home neighborhoods. Seller and Weis (1997) point out that understanding the privilege and marginalization students experience requires going beyond the Black-White dichotomy to fully take into account the “complexity of the current American landscape” (p. ix). Schools represent a microcosm of American society

and are important places in which to observe the effects of diversity and exposure to cultures other than one's own (Olsen, 1997). As Olsen observed in her study of an ethnically diverse high school in California, the presence of programs and spaces developed to support a multicultural does not preclude separation, conformity and exclusion. Accordingly, Tatum argues the importance of cultural space: "Having a place to be rejuvenated and to feel anchored in one's cultural community increases the possibility that one will have the energy to achieve academically as well as participate in the cross-group dialogue and interaction many colleges want to encourage" (1997; p. 80). It was, therefore, important to identify when participants in this study experience difference inside and outside of the college environment, and to determine how they seek out or establish sites of community in which to participate.

Women in this study found opportunities for affinity in predictable places: on campus, in groups formed based on nationality or region of origin; off campus, in immigrant enclaves or neighborhoods; and in their families. However, these spaces were themselves sometimes fraught with difference, and the extent to which they met participants' need for community was multiply determined. For example, when students spoke of themselves as immigrants living in *America*, race was the strongest force that determined their sense of community or exclusion. Blackness splintered at the *college-community* level, however, where Caribbean pan-ethnicity and nationality outnumbered race as sites around which students most often spoke of community. In contrast, the *family* emerged as a relatively stable nexus of belonging for most students. The incongruity of difference and community across these levels was a major finding, as one might expect relatively stable and distinct indicators of community to emerge in response

to experiencing difference. Further, the major sites of community (race, panethnicity, and nationality) served alternately as lines of demarcation. In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss how this intricate function of exclusion and belongingness cuts through various levels of analysis as women on these two college campuses discuss being Caribbean immigrants to America, members of a college community, family members and individuals.

### **Living in America: Race and Me**

While race and ethnicity were dominant themes in participants' discussion of their experience of difference and community, across the two campuses there was marked variation in "where" the distinctions were located. At Hunter College, being an immigrant woman of African ancestry in a college with a predominantly White student population intensified Caribbean women's experience of their Blackness in ways that were not experienced by those participants attending Medgar Evers College and were hence members of a predominantly Black student population. Hunter College students reported being conscious of their heightened visibility on campus and in the classrooms:

A\_\_\_\_: Every time I go at the beginning of the semester I make sure I turn around and count the Black faces I can see.

S\_\_\_\_: What's your major?

A\_\_\_\_: Psych and economics. And I'll sit there and I'll go, one, two, three. Right now I'm in a class where it's just me and this other Black girl and one guy. He's Chinese. Everybody else is White. I'm thinking, "Hello, we're

going to stand out here.” When you’re in a class like that, that professor will know you. They will know you. I don’t like that.

J \_\_\_\_: The worst class I had was Chemistry lab. I was the only Black person. I was like, OK. And Lord have mercy, in a class of fifteen, sixteen persons, I was the only Black person, so I stand out by myself. The next thing was, there were Asians and there were Russians that made up the rest of the class. Now they are speaking in their own language, you know, in their little groups and I am there like this, like OK [she mimics looking out of place with arms folded, eyes wide and gazing around]. I think that was my first semester ... I was like, this is not happening, you know, this not happening.

[P 7: HC\_2\_20\_02 - 7:11]

The last speaker in the preceding quote resorted to denial to reduce the discomfort she felt being the only woman in the room who was visibly of African descent. In her first semester, and therefore without a clique of her own, she was further excluded because of her nationality and her language. The larger message from this quote, however, is that these women are seeking community among their peers and, at times, their preferred community would be those who share their heritage. Because people of African ancestry – both those who are foreign-born and those who are US-born -- are in the numerical minority in this institution, students find themselves looking for a buffer from the othering gaze that is sure to be turned on them. No-one wants to be the only one

who is different. Later in the discussion, J\_\_\_\_\_ expanded on what seeing another face like hers in class meant to her:

J\_\_\_\_\_: ... regardless of wherever they came from, especially in the sciences, having experienced being in the class as a Black person by yourself, you feel so much more comfortable—it doesn't matter where that person is from—if you see another Black student in that class, you feel better. You understand? And you don't even have to know where he's from, Africa, or wherever, I don't care. If there's another Black person in my class, it's like I feel more at home in that class.

[P 7: HC\_2\_20\_02 - 7:11]

In contrast, participants who attended Medgar Evers College were members of a student population of mostly African American and Caribbean students, and so did not have to contend with being a racial minority on campus. These students spoke of feeling comfortable on campus, of having their Blackness reinforced by the Afrocentric ideology of the college, and of feeling a sense of comfort among their “own people”.

M\_\_\_\_\_: Well, actually, going to school at MEC is not really – to me – it's not really different from back home, because a lot of Caribbean people are here from all the different islands. So I don't really feel a difference, whereas if I go to, probably to Baruch, or one of those colleges where there is more diversity -- different people from different, you know, backgrounds, I might feel— but here I feel at home. To me, I feel at home because, most people I talk to are from the islands. We share the same

things, the same interests, the same ... we have a similar background.

There's no difference, really, whereas is I might go to a bigger college, probably like Baruch, where they have a lot of Whites and a lot of, you know, people from different – Chinese, Asians and those people – there might be a difference but here I feel at home. It's like I'm with my people.

[P 1: MEC\_11\_09\_01 1:1]

Experiencing a college community of similar others did not happen by chance for some students, since they chose to attend this college for reasons that include wanting to be among “their own” and wanting to avoid experiencing discrimination.

L\_\_\_\_: I went to an orientation at a college in Plattsburg ... and it was me and like, 12 Black people, and the whole community was White people. I couldn't move. (laughs) ... I came back here.

M\_\_\_\_: Yeah, because you don't really know how to act, whether you have to act the way you want to act or if you have to act a certain type of way around people who you're not really accustomed to.

L\_\_\_\_: Right, it's easier here

M\_\_\_\_: It's easier here. It's a Black college.

[P 1: MEC\_11\_09\_01 1:1]

When a student chooses a particular college, not on the basis of it's ability to prepare her for the career of her choosing but by whether or not she is likely to experience discrimination, at some point the quality of the education she receives gets

called into question. However, as the quote above illustrates, the potential of exclusion is enough to deter some students from choosing colleges that do not offer the assurance that they will not be part of a racial minority. Further, we hear in the discussion the strong awareness that being part of a Black numerical minority means one does not know “how to act”. This is the lowest point of unbelonging: when to be yourself is to be wrong and the script detailing acceptable ways of being is not available to you.

One important finding of the study is that the students at Medgar Evers College spoke of how the college’s ideology provided a boost for their self-esteem and racial identity. This explicit relationship between the institution and student’s personal and group identity is illustrated in the following quote from a discussion among participants at Medgar Evers College:

V\_\_\_\_: When I just came, I used to feel like, you know, I don’t belong. Like this is their country but now, I feel that just like anybody else, I have the right [to be here] just like anybody else. We all came here looking for something, so now, I’m more concrete now in how I think.

M\_\_\_\_: So many diversities come together. You know, Medgar makes you more conscious of your Blackness, right. Like some of the classes that you go in they talk about miscegenation, which is the mixing of the races. ... and some of the classes, the professors, they’re Afrocentric. They dress like that, and they teach you more about your Blackness. You get to love your nose and your lips and your face and your butt and your hips--

I\_\_\_\_: Love yourself—

M\_\_\_\_: -- and everything. You know, you get to be a strong, proud Black woman. So that when you're among these White people and maybe you're the only raisin among them, and plus you're educated, you could hang in with their circle and talk. You know, when they "Oh I've been to Harvard" and this, that, and the other, you could relate and you could talk with them too and you don't feel so out of place. So you know, Medgar makes me more conscious as a Black person.

Chorus: Yeah

[P2 MEC 11\_14\_01 2:6]

### **Within-Race: Exploring Caribbean Panethnic Identity**

Looking beyond Black and White distinctions to see where students were able to locate a community of similar others reveals that these sites of community, again, differed across the campuses. While participants on the Hunter College campus, with majority White students, experienced community as Caribbean nationals (i.e., by way of their panethnicity or race), participants at Medgar Evers College, which has a large population of Caribbean nationals, spoke of finding community with others of their country of origin (i.e., nationality or ethnicity). This was especially true of participants who were from those countries with the largest numbers of students on that campus: Jamaica, Haiti, and Trinidad.

At Medgar Evers College, a relatively racially homogenous campus, difference was primarily based on social practices related to being American-born or foreign-born. In addition, generational status (i.e., whether they were first-generation or second-generation immigrants) and the length of time since immigration were sources of

demarcation as well. Primarily, the distinctions centered on how things are done at home versus how they are done in the US. This juxtaposition of norms and values, although not the racially determined differences that shaped community on the predominantly White campus, are equally powerful in their influence on students' well-being and identity.

Participants' perception of within-group differences is illustrated in the following quote:

L\_\_\_\_: Well it is different. Like kids walking in at any time, they can eat in the class, they sit with their legs over the chair. We can't do that back home. We'd get kicked out of class!

M\_\_\_\_: Everybody who grew up here, the way they behave is kinda different from what we're accustomed to. They have different attitudes that we are not really accustomed to, we have certain values that we have and some of them [here] are "anything goes".

[P 1: MEC\_11\_09\_01 1:1]

This discussion is highlighting the way the students see themselves, as immigrants, being different from American-born students. Although they are referring to students who, like them, are of African ancestry, the behaviors they describe violate the norms with which they grew up and hence, their perception of sameness and community is diminished. This disunion is more explicit in the following excerpt:

Tracy: So, I know you have a lot of Caribbean students here at Medgar. Do you have a lot of American-born students?

M\_\_\_\_: There are more Caribbean than Americans. There are some people who have Caribbean parents but they were born here but most of them have the American kind of lifestyle—

L\_\_\_\_: The behavior

M\_\_\_\_: Yeah

Tracy: So, give me some other examples of behaviors that might be different here from what they'd be back home in class.

M\_\_\_\_: They're aggressive, they're very aggressive.

L\_\_\_\_: Extremely aggressive

M\_\_\_\_: Yeah, aggressive. You know, we might be a little more polite, whereas they're like, everything you ask them, might be short-answered. They don't want to have the time to really explain anything, they're really aggressive.

Tracy: And that's the students or the teachers, or both?

L\_\_\_\_: No, just the students. I don't really talk to the teachers one-on-one to say that.

M\_\_\_\_: And yet, those Caribbean people who're here for probably two, three years, they adopt the same attitudes and lifestyles and forget their own and they adopt what they have seen around the campus. This Amer-- this you know, aggressive way.

L\_\_\_\_: I was just thinking, that's true! (Laughing) Instead of them coming here and trying to change the people here, they change to the people here.

M\_\_\_\_: They want to fit in, they want to, you know, be recognized. They want to be noticed. So, it's like they forget all their values and they just want to be like everyone else, they want to dress a certain way, they want to be wearing [name] brands, their hair—

L\_\_\_\_: --their nails

M\_\_\_\_: Their nails, even their accent. You know.

L\_\_\_\_: That's true.

[P 1: MEC\_11\_09\_01 1:1]

Evidently, there are many ways to distinguish an American-born Black person from a foreign-born Black person. Some of these markers are in appearance, others are in speech and behavior, and others are indicated by a particular mindset. Immigrant students who want to minimize their Caribbean peculiarities take on the characteristics of American-born students. Others, like the students quoted above, are critical of such behavior. This awareness of within-race difference is echoed by a group of students who attend Hunter College which, although predominantly White, has a more ethnically diverse student population than that of Medgar Evers College:

Tracy: Now let me ask you. When you're on campus. So there are these ethnic groups. The Latin or Spanish group, the Asians, and what you call African-Americans. When you say African-Americans, who are you--?

D\_\_\_\_: I say African-American as distinct from, say--

P\_\_\_\_: Black people?

B \_\_\_\_: --Blacks. Like I don't consider myself African-American. I'm Black. As a matter of fact I'm Negro [laughter] but anyway, since I'm in the US, I'm Black. And in a sense the African-Americans, Black Americans have a completely different mind set from say, West Indians. There are West Indians who associate with African Americans and consider themselves African-American, but I mean, it's all about you. There may be people who are West Indian who may have come here, say, from age ten and they've certainly been acculturated to the Black American thing and they consider themselves to be black Americans. And there are people who came here at age five and to this day they're West Indians. And they've probably gone to the Caribbean like a handful of times but they have a West Indian accent and they consider themselves Trini 'til they die. So it's a whole different thing so I don't really consider myself African American.

M \_\_\_\_: Can we explore this some more? I want to hear from you two as to what she just said about identity. She makes the separation, that Blacks are different from African-Americans. Do you see it in the same way?

P \_\_\_\_: Yes, I do.

M \_\_\_\_: Why is that?

P \_\_\_\_: Because the--

Tracy: Well, first, what do you consider yourself? Do you identify as--

P \_\_\_\_: Oh, Caribbean.

Tracy: OK, Caribbean or Vincentian?

P\_\_\_\_: Caribbean. Because I look at the Caribbean as a whole. My sister came here. She went to high school here and if you listen to me and listen to her, it's different. The way she looks at life, it's so different. She is a frivolous, kinda party – that kind of stuff.

Tracy: Younger or older than you?

P\_\_\_\_: Younger. My sister and I who stayed in St Vincent, we're more positive. We look more on a career. They just go through the motions. They just come and go to high school, they go to high school and then into college. They have a paved way. We had to struggle for what we got so it's kind of different. It's totally different.

R\_\_\_\_: Like for me I consider myself Caribbean too but I find most of the Americans are so materialistic. They don't really appreciate what they have, like they get financial aid–

P\_\_\_\_: Exactly.

R\_\_\_\_: –and they're still complaining about a bunch of unnecessary things. They worry about going to the mall and clothes, that's another thing. Like the whole mindset when it comes to how you look. People don't, they're not concerned with going to school and studying and getting good grades. Everything is just so material. Pointless.

P\_\_\_\_: But it's easier for them. As you say, they have financial aid and live with their parents but some of us we have to work and pay our way through school so we have a totally different outlook. That is why people from the Caribbean come to America and accomplish so much more than people

who've been here. So that is one thing, that's why I look at myself as Caribbean.

[P5: HC\_2\_13\_02 5:11]

These sentiments were repeatedly expressed from group to group across both campuses and reflected the dominant attitude among Caribbean immigrants. Not only were most participants clear about how they were different from African Americans, they were very clear that they did not want to be considered African American. Consequently, they made this distinction as they defined their own social identity, and hence, these lines bounded their sense of belongingness and participation; simultaneously, these lines marked who they were not and hence, circumscribed their perceptions of exclusion.

Tracy: Who hangs together on campus? Do the-- I mean, do you have friendships around majors or clubs or is it predominant that people hang together by ethnic group or where they come from or what? What are the cliques like?

R\_\_\_\_: I did a year at Brooklyn College and I found that everybody was kind of like, separated. If you go in the cafeteria you have-- a lot of Jews go to that school. So you have the Jews and you have the Blacks and you have Spanish and then people like me who just sit on their own. It's very, very different. Even in class it's something. Everybody has their friends that they sit with. No one really mixes.

Tracy: Does that apply here also?

[Chorus--yes]

R\_\_\_\_: Yeah. Definitely. In classes. Especially in classes.

D\_\_\_\_: I think it's especially difficult if you're an older student because I'm an older student. I think younger people are more open to building new friendships . . . I'm a big woman and I have friends already. A lot of people, I just don't see myself having anything in common with them. I cannot relate to them . . . Oh, the other thing is that I don't think I can be really good friends with people who aren't at least West Indian. So, like my good friends are all West Indians. My friends who I've met here, well, actually, it's just one [laughter], who I would say is a friend, she is St. Lucian and so I can't-- I don't know, it's me relating to people. As an older student and as a West Indian, I can't...

R\_\_\_\_: Like you go into class and you meet somebody, if you miss a day you can call –

D\_\_\_\_: Right. That is important. But . . . it would take me a while to feel out and see who I think is smart and who I think is someone that I can relate to at least just on that level before I do that. I'm just very picky, when it comes to interacting with people.

R\_\_\_\_: I think that they are socialized differently from us. They don't gravitate to people easily in this country, they kind of keep their distance because they are afraid something would happen. In the Caribbean we would make friends. You would come to my home, we would go to yours, you know what I mean? It's just a difference in socialization. They're more protective here.

Tracy: What do you think, M\_\_\_\_?

M\_\_\_\_: It's pretty much as R\_\_\_\_ described it. People typically stay in their cliques, whether it's by nationality or race or whatever it is. I have a few friends that I met here but it's always easier to be more comfortable with people who you think have something in common with. Or there's something about them that's familiar in terms of geographic region that they're from somewhere close to you or have some kind of related experience to you or something like that. I did try to have some friends who aren't like from my geographic region, or my color and something like that but I found that didn't really last far beyond school. [Laughter] I don't know if it was on my part because I'm not a phone person that's gonna call you every two days to talk. Maybe it was my fault, so I don't know about that.

[P 5: HC\_2\_13\_02 5:9]

This within-race marking (American-born Blacks perceived as being different from Caribbean-born Blacks) was so persistent that one must consider, what utility, if any, does this sustained distinction fulfill? Brewer (1999) argues that the self evolves in response to the requirements of the social environment. While the well-being of humans is dependent on their in-group membership and participation, individuals rely on being able to distinguish themselves from each other in ways that are important to them. So the more we are similar, the more we strive to be different. Perhaps Caribbean immigrants, away from those who are most like them, focus on ways they perceive themselves to be different from African Americans in an effort to hold on to (or reach back towards) what

they left behind. If this is so, such yearning for home, as is expressed by the following participant, fuels the endurance of the within-race distinction:

J \_\_\_\_: I miss the community, man. When you go home and you can go outside and you can open your door and leave your door open all night. I miss having a community where you're so comfortable. I had friends in school and when you go home, it's like you have such a big family. You know, I'm talking about when I go home, and I go over to my neighbor's house and I eat dinner. And then you drop asleep over there and they put the sheet over you and your parents know you're there and it's not a problem, you know? When I came here, and of course you're in a box. I have no backyard, I don't see grass—well I have a little grass in but—you come here and you're in a box and your social life is basically school, or if you have friends at work, and home. Otherwise, you hardly know your neighbors, you hardly have a feel of your community when you come here. And it's so, so, so much different from when you're home. So different.

[P7: HC 2\_20\_02 7:12]

Other participants, like J \_\_\_\_, emphasized that community was socially and physically different back home. Adjusting to difference is difficult. During the focus groups, participants discussed a wide range of difficulties they encountered in adapting to life in America and as college students. When I asked them what they thought Caribbean students needed to do to deal with the difficulties they faced, their responses included

community as a resource they should rely on and contribute to. Again, sustaining the within-race distinction had a role in this regard.

L\_\_\_\_: We just have to go back to community. It takes a village. Things like that, I think that is absolutely important. And then you take it into all your social settings. It's not a bad thing but I don't have White friends, I don't have Black American friends. All my friends are Caribbean. I have a tight network. And when you stop and think, you need it. If I should lose that I wouldn't be anywhere. I can't tell you how many people I go home and call and say make sure you get home safely. Everybody needs to have that. I'm not saying that it has to be a large community. It just has to be a community that supports one another. And that's what we need to go back to.

[P8: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part I]

Community membership and participation is, therefore, essential for these students who are away from the country of their birth. For those who self-consciously seek out or strive to retain community, community is often defined as a network of others from a background perceived to be similar to their own. While community may extend beyond their country of origin, for most, community is bounded by the Caribbean region. The classification, "Caribbean", works well as a pan-ethnic identity around which to transcend national boundaries and form community based on cultural background and similarity of experiences prior to and since coming to the US.

### **National Identification**

National level differences also impact the experiences of Caribbean students attending US colleges. Although these are rarely perceived by outsiders, there are notable differences within the anglophone and francophone Caribbean in dialect (some may argue “language” but this depends one’s definition of these terms), cultural practices and behavior. According to Phinney (1992), ethnic identity is that aspect of social identity that derives from knowledge of membership in a social group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. She argues that the ethnic label one chooses to use is separate from ethnicity, which she defines as objective group membership determined by parents’ heritage. For Caribbean immigrants, their self-identification may reflect the regional label, and at other times, an equally appropriate ethnic identity may be synonymous with their nation of origin. Either of these chosen ethnic labels may or may not be consistent with their ethnicity. The complexity of ethnic identity becomes clear as, in this section, I present what participants see as being different among Caribbean nationals, and why.

As was illustrated in the preceding sections, national selectivity was not an option for students at Hunter College. Since this campus had a mix of students from diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, the numbers of students from individual Caribbean countries were too small to sustain national level groupings. On that campus, students had a vibrant club of Caribbean students and some participants reported relying on their Caribbean identity for community membership and participation. Participants who were members of the Caribbean Students’ Union discussed their shifting ethnic identity as follows:

Tracy: But listen, in the Caribbean, what do we call ourselves? Say for example, how did you think of yourselves in terms of an ethnic identity when you were home? Or racial identity?

A\_\_\_\_: Black, I saw myself as Black

J\_\_\_\_: Jamaican. When I was home, if you asked me, I'm Jamaican. I came here, "I'm Jamaican." "No, you're Black" It's different— When you're home you're like, you're Jamaican, or you're from Barbados, or whatever. But here, it doesn't matter where you're from, what's your ethnic group. You do not see Afro-Caribbean on any of these applications or African-American or whatever. You see Black, you see Caucasian, you see Asian, you see Spanish, you see all kind of stuff. So that was another thing that I had to get used to because when you're home you're not really exposed to the prejudice, as far as your ethnic group is concerned. You're not—

S\_\_\_\_: You don't think about race because everybody is the same. What you have is like, browning [*i.e., hierarchical labeling based on skin shade*], and stuff like that, but basically you know everybody is Black. So you really don't think of yourself as that. But how you distinguish is where they were born. If you were born in America, you're an American, even if you were raised down there. Up here now, it's more a big deal. Oh, you're White, Oh, you're Black, Oh, you're Chinese or Asian.

[P7: HC 2\_20\_02]

In contrast, on the Medgar Evers College campus, where the student population consisted of mostly Caribbean immigrants, participants reported that the apparently homogenous student cliques found ways of distinguishing themselves from each other. Not only did the social groups break out by country of origin, but also groups had varying degrees of support for each other and got varying levels of regard from outsiders, depending on their size, relative to the other groups of students. This is illustrated in the following quote:

Tracy: So I have a question here. I'm doing this study here and at Hunter, so different questions get different responses, depending on where I am. Take this one, for example, "Do Caribbean students stick together on campus?" but if you're almost all Caribbean, do you have an answer for that?

M\_\_\_\_: Yeah.

L\_\_\_\_: Yes.

M\_\_\_\_: What happens is that they group together.

Tracy: So how do the groups form?

M\_\_\_\_: Like Trinidadians together. For example, among the foreign students, you might see a group of Trinidadians or you might see Trinidadians and Jamaicans. You'll see, not really Caribbeans. But the Haitians, they stick together. They're strong.

Tracy: Really?

L\_\_\_\_: They're really strong 'cause there are a lot of them here.

M\_\_\_\_: They are strong. Whereas, for example a Trinidadian might—if you tell one Haitian person something [*offensive about another Haitian*], all the

others are gonna come down on you. Whereas you might tell a Trinidadian person something [*offensive about another Trinidadian*], and they [*Trinidadians*] would try to pull them [*the Trinidadian*] down: “Oh what she feel she doing?” and this that and the third. Not those Haitians.

[P 1: MEC\_11\_09\_01 - 1:6]

On that campus, the largest numbers of Caribbean-born students are from Jamaica, followed by Trinidad. The third largest group is the Haitians who, because of their relative numbers, their tendency to protect and defend each other, and their ability to speak to each other in Creole and not be understood by others, are perceived to be impenetrable. Although students from the other countries form cliques, they also form friendships and relationships that cross country lines; hence, their cohesion is perceived to be less stable. Later in the discussion, participants again referred to the Haitians, attempting to explain why they were perceived to have such strong bonds:

M\_\_\_\_: It’s a family thing. Because even though, like on Eastern Parkway [*at the West Indian American Parade*] when they put up the flags, you’ll see a Trinidadian and an American, you’ll see a Trinidadian and a Dominican, you will see different countries mixing—

L\_\_\_\_: the Haitians are over there—

M\_\_\_\_: I have never seen a Haitian-- I’m being real—I have never seen a Haitian and a Trinidadian, or a Haitian and something else. I haven’t seen it.

Tracy: Suppose a Haitian was here, would you say that?

Both: Yeah!

M\_\_\_\_: -- because I asked. I was talking to one and I said, you people are really close, I said, but how come you all don't mix? He said what do you mean we don't mix? I said, the Haitians stick with Haitians and marry you all own kind. He said, probably his parents, but now, you know, they do their own thing. I said, but I don't see it. So their family is like that and their family will tell them the same thing.

[P 1: MEC\_11\_09\_01 - 1:9]

It was clear from those discussions on the Medgar Evers College that there were distinct national demarcations among the students. Of course, participants from countries with small numbers of students at that college are at the margins of these bonds, as is illustrated by the quote below.

Tracy: OK. Now, when you're at Medgar-- you talked before about having a lot of Caribbean people around but are you conscious of yourself being Caribbean when you're here? Or, do you just blend in so much that it doesn't matter? Do you feel-- do you think about it?

L\_\_\_\_: Well, not really Caribbean but I think about being, like, Dominican because most of the accents here—like the Jamaican accent, I don't really get it all the time. They speak too quickly, and the things they say, I don't really understand so . . . all right, slow down or translate this to English for me.

Tracy: Do you have a lot of Dominican students or do you feel like everybody else is from somewhere else?

L\_\_\_\_: (laughs) Everybody else is from somewhere else! There're like maybe  
about five of us here—

Tracy: Really, in the whole college?

L\_\_\_\_: Five that I know of.

M\_\_\_\_: yeah, they're not much. There are mostly Haitians—

L\_\_\_\_: Yeah, Haitians, Jamaicans, Trinidadians--

M\_\_\_\_: Trinidadians and Jamaicans

L\_\_\_\_: So where are you from?

M\_\_\_\_: Trinidad

L\_\_\_\_: Oh. That's it – Jamaicans, Trinidadians (laughs)

[P1: MEC 11\_09\_01 1:3]

Here the participant L\_\_\_\_ is pointing out the fact that even as she comments on the relative dominance of students from Haiti, Trinidad and Jamaica, she is sitting in a room with a Jamaican (me) and a Trinidadian (the other participant). This is representative of the ethnic makeup of most of the groups in which she finds herself on campus, since there are not many students there from her country, Dominica. Her experience is different from that of M\_\_\_\_ who is from Trinidad, home to the second largest number of Caribbean-born students on that campus. Students from those Caribbean countries with large numbers of students at that school are more secure: the larger Caribbean student population provides more opportunity to form friendships and other supportive relationships.

### **Possibility of a Pan-African Identity?**

The preceding sections illustrate the complex nature of race, ethnicity and nationality as sites of identity. When discussions of these social categories as the basis of identity have been de-politicized, de-contextualized and ahistorical, we achieve a limited understanding of what these categories mean to the targets, and we may not fully grasp when these meanings shift to take on more or less importance, depending on what is at stake in the moment. The fluidity of identities demonstrated here, however, does not mean that the identities are inconsequential. For example, when Caribbean immigrants privilege their regional or national identities over their Black identity, the implications of within-race division are devastating to those concerned with unity among peoples of African ancestry across the globe and an enduring Pan-African identity. It is worth mentioning that there were moments in the focus groups when the dominant discourse of community and exclusion (i.e., immigrants from one's region or nation as community; American-born Blacks as other) was interrupted and challenged:

S\_\_\_\_: I have a problem with that. I don't know if you guys have this problem but I personally, cannot relate very much to those pro-Black African Americans, because I find that they annoy the crap out of me. They're very pro-Black, to the point where it almost sounds racist, OK. And we don't tolerate racism towards us, so why should we tolerate racism toward another race? People are like, "Hey, my brother, hey, my sister." OK, you're not my brother, you didn't come out of my mother's womb. Don't call me your sister, right. Or, some African-Americans, they say, "Oh, my African sister," I say, "Excuse me, but I'm not African—

J \_\_\_\_: But let me ask you a question. Do you find it offensive for them to refer to you as an African sister?

S \_\_\_\_: No. As an African American, yes. I'm not African American.

J \_\_\_\_: No, if I come to you and you don't know me and I say, "Hi, my African sister," would you be offended?

S \_\_\_\_: I wouldn't really be offended but—

A \_\_\_\_: She said if they call her African American

S \_\_\_\_: -- you know, I don't like people calling me sister. I don't call my male, Black friends brother.

Tracy: So how do you feel about it, J \_\_\_\_?

J \_\_\_\_: Because I know the struggle that we've been through. There're so many people that went through so much for us to be able to even sit here. You are going for your Ph.D. All this stuff that happened. I don't have a problem with you identifying with me based on our race or ethnic background. I don't have a problem with that . . . to me, that's the first step to saying, you know what? Let's talk. Let me be your friend, something like that. If, for some reason we talk and we really can't get along then that would be the end of it but I'm not going to be offended if you refer to me as a Black sister. I'm not going to be offended by that because you can't be closed minded because someone says those things. That's just how I feel about it.

[P7: HC\_2\_20\_02 7:11]

Interruptions such as these provide pockets of evidence of a critical consciousness around race and indicate the possibility of a broader definition of community for Caribbean immigrants. The coalition of persons of African ancestry across geographical boundaries suggested by the last speaker is consistent with, and indicates an essential component of, positive marginality: the recognition that one is part of a larger community of resistant others [see definition and larger discussion of positive marginality in Section III, Reconsidering the Margin]. This positioning recognizes that one does not always experience exclusion because of individual characteristics, but also as a member of a group of similar, stigmatized others. In this vein, similarity might then be reframed to embrace all persons of African ancestry as members of a diasporic community that is marginalized in America. This is the view put forth by another participant who, in another focus group, interrupted the discourse that fixed the limits of community by excluding African Americans:

L\_\_\_\_: That is the difference that I find with Black Americans and Caribbean Americans. We come here and we don't know how to identify with them.

Tracy: o.k.

M\_\_\_\_: But the thing is the majority of people in there [referring to Daughters of Africa, a student club] are of Caribbean decent. It's just that they probably have a different way of looking at things. I have a way of looking at things that is probably compatible with them to a certain extent too. And that doesn't mean that because they're African American and we're from the Caribbean that we're going to have all these-- we are going

to have issues that are, you know seemingly conflicting on the surface, but we have to understand that those are purely circumstantial. If I grew up here, I would not have those differences, we are the same people. That's the way I feel, it's just certain variations in the situations that made us who we are. West Indians are not innately more hard working or more educated or speak better; it's just because of our socialization. So when we come here and, you know, we have these people telling us, that we're different, that we somehow work harder than African Americans, and we buy into that shit-- we're the same people . . . the only difference with African Americans is that they've been here longer. If I come here and I settle here and I have children here, better believe my concerns will be practically the same thing.

L\_\_\_\_: But they may have had different experiences

M\_\_\_\_: That's true, I agree with that, I agree the experience is different, but I still think-- it's like o.k. It's like taking a piece of cloth and cutting different shapes out of it, does that make it different? [L\_\_\_\_: No, no] No, it doesn't, it makes it the same cloth in different shapes, you understand? So you see the difference?

L\_\_\_\_: Yes, but to mold--

M\_\_\_\_: No, molding is a lot but the substance is also very important.

T\_\_\_\_: But we're not--

M\_\_\_\_: I see that, I see the differences, I know the differences, but I think those things can be over ridden . . . we should not fall into this trap of defining

ourselves as different people from African Americans. I understand that we need to do that to a certain extent because as I said the experiences have been different. However, Caribbean is not a race unto itself. Don't tell me I'm not Black, I'm Caribbean. I'm not African. I'm not Afro this, I'm Caribbean. Because this little island has a very shallow history. Believe it or not, you are only Jamaicans for a couple hundred years . . . before that we were something.

[P8: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part I 8:7; 8:13]

The view of a pan-African community that was put forth by J\_\_\_\_\_ and M\_\_\_\_\_ in the preceding two quotes was not the majority viewpoint among participants in this study. Note that they each included qualifiers like, “that’s the I feel about it.”, which suggests they knew they were not representing an accepted position. Overall, participants were more likely to defend a Caribbean or national identity and rarely understood or felt the need to identify with all persons of African ancestry. When these interruptions occurred, other participants would counter with references to aspects of their experiences as Caribbean persons to explain why it did not make sense for them to embrace an exclusively African (or Black) identity. For example, several participants made reference to having Chinese, East Indian or European relatives; others rejected a “pro-Black” stance as extremist and bordering on hate-mongering and at the very least, reverse racism, as is illustrated in the following quote:

A\_\_\_\_\_: I don't like that pro-Black thing period, and I have my reasons for it. For one, if I do that it's like I basically disown a part of me. Yes, I am Black

but I still have family that is White and I still have family that is mixed. And I have Indian, Black, you know, and I cannot see myself discriminating because if I do that, I'm discriminating against my own family. And in my eyes, it's not right. All men are equal. So when you hear they have protests, like when they had the Million-Man March. I'm like, Ok, yeah, we are in the struggle, yeah we got to stand up and protest stuff but sometimes in that itself, can't that also bring out prejudice within us, and racism? Even though you can't see it, it can cause that to be developed within somebody. Because no-one knows every man's mind.

[HC: 2\_20\_02]

### **Family and Personal Identification**

Themes of home and family in the discussions provided evidence of a core esteem that enabled some participants to reconcile their experiences of exclusion with the knowledge that they belonged. As participants talked through their identity construction in the context of their relocation, the basis for their belongingness came out in very distinct references to the physical space, here and at home:

Tracy: Has the way you identify yourself changed since you moved from Trinidad? When you were in Trinidad, what did you think of yourself as and is that any different now that you live in New York?

D\_\_\_\_: Yeah. I guess so. In Trinidad, we were considered the one percent. When you are a graduate from the University of the West Indies, you are the one percent. And people look up to you. If you carry your books to school, people on the street think "Oh, she is a lawyer. She is a

professional lady. See how she dresses. I am sure she is a graduate from UWI.” People can distinguish that you are different from them because it is a small community. In America, the neighbor doesn’t care if you are a Ph.D. student or if you are applying for a fellowship. You’re invisible here. But in a small community, people know you. They know you are so and so’s daughter, they know that you have graduation because they look through the window and they see you dressed up in your gown. I miss that. I miss that community feeling. ‘Cause it’s too big; you’re lost and you’re invisible. So I miss that a lot. And it is felt, the difference itself. You blend in until you’re nothing, you’re invisible, except to your professors who know you’re outstanding, and they will maybe put up your name for something. It pays to know your Chair and know your Dean. And have them know you by name. It pays. I tell people don’t be shy. Go ask questions. Go talk to them in their room. Know where they sit, know their phone numbers. It helps. It helps a lot.

Tracy: Do you think our experience in the Caribbean prepares us for doing such things?

D\_\_\_\_: No. Not all. It doesn’t. I think you have to have your own personal motivation to get somewhere. Nobody is going to lift you up and say D\_\_\_\_, you know, we’re having a meeting for people who are interested in doing the Ph.D. Nobody is going to take your hand and show you the way. You have to have interest. You have to take an initiative and you

have to be motivated. You have to know this is where your goal is and this is where you want to end up. Nobody is going to take you.

[P 6: HC 2\_19\_02 6:8]

In this setting that is so different from home, sometimes it comes down to individual characteristics – initiative and motivation – to overcome the challenges these differences present. This was evident across the two campuses, where students referred to their home experiences as the basis for the drive and confidence that fueled their pursuits.

T\_\_\_\_: When I was home, man, my Daddy, you know, I get to drive the car.

From I'm sixteen I'm driving, you think you're something. You think you're something, right, and you come here and who cares?

A\_\_\_\_: Who cares? Nobody.

T\_\_\_\_: You can dress in your Sunday best, it don't matter, and I used to-- I think I was something. You know, you kinda known. But you come here and the people look in your face like listen little girl, little girl, there's a bigger one, you're nobody. And that was another thing, that's why my phone bill ran up so much, you know, because of the adjustment. You know and your father can't pull the strings and get you the little job, or get you the hotel space for the weekend or, none of that . . . But even so, when I was home [*during the holidays*] Daddy was like, "you know you have a nice little group of friends, everybody's doing something". Because we, it was only

when I was home I realized; [speaking slowly] I'm in the, sort of privileged sect in Trinidad, where my social circle with my friends-- we go to clubs, we drink and we spend money. You know, because it's -- like mommy and daddy have them, even if they don't have their own money, mommy and daddy have them. You understand? So I realized, come on! Come on, nobody can pop style on me then! [laughter] You know what I'm saying? Nobody can pop style on me, because I know that I'm worth. When I went home I realized I know what I'm worth. Because sometimes you have a tendency to get lost, you know.

[P 7: HC\_2\_20\_02 7:12]

This participant told of how a trip back home one holiday reminded her of where she was from; going home allowed her to view her background with new appreciation. The knowledge that at home she had a car to drive, parents who approved of her and supported her, friends who were from a similar background and who knew her – all of this offset the alienation she experienced in the US and reinforced her worth. Both of these participants spoke of being lost, or invisible, much in the same vein as the women in the beginning of this chapter did, who felt they were constantly being treated as if they were not there. The knowledge of *who* they were *before* they were immigrant women of color in college helped them to transcend the negative effects of their transition.

### **Conclusion**

Findings presented in this section demonstrated that students experienced exclusion on the basis of their race, ethnicity, nationality and individual characteristics. However, these same social markers formed the basis for their experience of community

– and to varying degrees, represented the goals for which they strove in their efforts to create and maintain their sense of self. For this group, identity is constructed and re-constructed, sometimes in ways that appeared spontaneous but was actually deeply rooted in who they were, are and hope to become. The following quote encapsulates these ideas and serves as a fitting end to the chapter:

Tracy: I know that here you have a lot of women, and a lot of people from the Caribbean, right? How do you see yourself on campus, in the wider society, and has there been any change in how you view yourself now, as opposed to when you lived back home?

I \_\_\_\_: Well, the similarities-- like I said before, we're all out for one thing. To come here, graduate, get our diploma, make the best of our classes, and you know, move on to bigger and better things in our lives . . . because that is what all of us came here to do, regardless of where we're from, you know. In terms of difference, I could say, motivation because, there are a lot of people who won't do a lot and will get away with certain things. Me, in my case, I just try to bust my behind as much as can, in terms of school. Much less looking for a job and helping my mom raise my little sister. So that's the only thing. It kind of brings me a lot more motivation to do a lot more for myself. That's the only difference, like I said, the amount of motivation and how far you're willing to go to get what you want.

Tracy: So where does your motivation come from?

I \_\_\_\_: Like I said, it all starts within yourself, really. And plus, the amount of guidance you get within your house, for you to do certain things within

yourself, and know that in some degrees you are different from other people in terms of how far you're willing to go to get what you want. But at the same time we're all the same, in terms of achieving certain goals, bettering ourselves and knowing that everyday is like a learning process. We all learn something new. That's why I can't tolerate people thinking they're better than anybody else because they have certain things, you know, when we all out for one thing, which is making money, getting the education, and having a family.

[P2 MEC 11\_14\_01 2:6]

### III

#### Reconsidering the Margin

*As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change.*

*Lorde, 1984 (p.122)*

My goal in doing research on the experiences of Caribbean-born women attending US Colleges is to understand the unique challenges members of this group confront as foreign-born women of color and to identify the resources that enable them to overcome these challenges. This exploration of unique challenges and related resources targets those spaces where educational institutions, even those with a minority or an ethnically diverse student population, do not attend to the variation and heterogeneity of the students they serve. Instead of focusing on the potential pitfalls of the college experience, however, in this chapter I will discuss what might enable persistence towards the degree. Specifically, I present here an analysis of how well the concept, positive marginality, might capture Caribbean-born women's response to the experience of being a foreign-born woman of color living in the United States and pursuing a college degree.

Rhoda Unger (1998, 2000) used the concept *positive marginality* to describe the process whereby individuals re-frame stigmatized characteristics associated with their social group in order to facilitate personal and social change. According to Unger, positive marginality involves members of a marginalized category recognizing their power to choose to see their identity as positive, and the belief that previously devalued aspects of their self are legitimate. Unger's work on positive marginality is conceptually related to bell hooks' (1990) description of the margin as a space of radical openness and

possibility. hooks argues that the margin is a valued space where one might come to creatively imagine the possibility of different social contexts or worlds. The features of positive marginality, put together from the work of Unger and hooks, are summarized in Figure I.

Figure I

### Characteristics of Positive Marginality

- 
- **The Ability To Recognize “Stigma” As Positive**  
 Similar to hooks’ conception of choosing the margin, Unger’s construct of positive marginality involves recognizing one’s power to choose to see one’s identity as positive, and the belief that previously devalued aspects of one’s self are legitimate.
  - **Knowledge That Structure Influences Personal Experience**  
 Positive marginality promotes awareness that injustice is rooted in structural processes and rather than in personal inadequacy (Unger 2000).
  - **Responsibility For Social Change For Self And Others**  
 Unger asserts, “. . . a view of reality that recognizes the overwhelming nature of gender, race and class oppression can be debilitating unless it includes a view that the individuals can be agents of change” (2000; p.177). The conviction that one’s action can effect change allows marginalized individuals to work toward change for themselves and for others.
  - **Recognize membership in a larger community**  
 According to hooks, choosing the margin involves recognition of one’s marginalized status as located in a larger community of resistance, in a space that is valued, that allows one to creatively imagine the possibility of different social contexts or worlds.
-

### **Experiencing Marginality**

Before looking for evidence of positive marginality, however, it is important to consider whether or not members of this group perceive themselves to be socially marginalized. This is important because leading scholars often debate, using economic indicators as evidence, the extent to which Caribbean immigrants have been affected by the structural and social impediments that plague African Americans (See chapters edited by Foner, 2001 for examples of such analyses). However, an exploration of the psychological dimensions of the immigrant experience requires a broader focus. As Brice-Baker (1994) explains, the degree to which Caribbean women are satisfied with their experiences as immigrants to America depends on which measure is used to assess the benefits they obtained by the move. If the assessment is based on material possessions and wealth, they may achieve advancements beyond what was available to them in their home countries. However, if the treatment of people of color by Whites is the standard by which their benefits are assessed, then Caribbean women may or may not be aware of how their advancement may be impeded by the very systems presumed to protect them. Just how impervious to marginality is this group? If they do report being marginalized, what social identity forms the basis of their marginalization?

Evidence of marginality was identified among the participants in this study in the way students discussed their college experience. When asked what it was like to be a student at their college, they made reference to the ethnic and racial composition of the student population, which played a major role in how they felt about being students there.

Tracy: ... just to find out what it's like going to school here at Medgar Evers,  
Anybody can start, what is it like?

M\_\_\_\_: Well, actually, going to school at Medgar Evers College is not really – to me – it's not really DIFFERENT from back home because a lot of Caribbean people are here from all the DIFFERENT islands. So I don't really feel a DIFFERENCE, whereas if I go to, probably to B\_\_\_\_, or one of those colleges where there is more DIVERSITY -- DIFFERENT people from DIFFERENT, you know, backgrounds, I might feel— but here I feel at home. To me, I feel at home because most people I talk to are from the islands. We share the SAME things, the SAME interests, it's the SAME.

Tracy: So the first thing that comes to mind is that you feel at home because there are a lot of people who are like you or who have your background?

M\_\_\_\_: Yeah, we have a SIMILAR background. There's no DIFFERENCE, really, whereas is I might go to a bigger college, probably like B\_\_\_\_, where they have a lot of Whites and a lot of, you know, people from DIFFERENT – Chinese, Asians and those people – there might be a DIFFERENCE [there] but here I feel at home. It's like I'm with my people.

[P 1: MEC\_11\_09\_01 - 1:13]

I have used capital letters to emphasize the number of times this participant spoke of a comparison – *who* is the same? *What* is different? Social groups, which have important consequences for people's lives, are part of the structure of today's society. Difference matters. In the United States, the major categories of difference are race, social class, gender, and sexual orientation. In this context, essentialist notions skew

perceptions of difference, where members of groups labeled subordinate are considered deviant for possessing characteristics not consistent with the dominant group, the norm. Here, we see that the experience and the meaning of experiencing racial and ethnic difference weighs heavily in some students' assessment of their college experience.

Social grouping is not inherently bad. Some schools struggle to increase the diversity of their student populations and staff, in recognition of the value of having students from varying backgrounds learn in relation to each other. Others deliberately cater exclusively to a particular group, with the view that re-affirming cultural distinctiveness and reinforcing relevant traditional values and norms is the best way to prepare youth in their target group for life in society. The student quoted above attends a college named in honor of an African American civil rights leader and founded to meet the needs of residents of a predominantly Black community. This discussion sheds further light on why, for these students, encountering racial and ethnic difference was not desirable and shows that this consideration played a major role in which schools they eventually selected or rejected. This is further illustrated in the quote that follows, in which one student is giving an account of her visit to a college orientation in upstate New York:

L\_\_\_\_: Yeah, and it was me and like, 12 Black people, and the whole community was White people. I couldn't move. (laughs)

Tracy: You couldn't move to Plattsburg?

L\_\_\_\_: No, I came back here

M\_\_\_\_: Yeah, because you don't really know how to act, whether you have to act the way you want to act or if you have to act a certain type of way around people who people you're not really accustomed to.

L\_\_\_\_: Right, it's easier here

M\_\_\_\_: It's easier here. It's a Black college.

Tracy: Right, OK. So that figured into you choosing here and not going to Plattsburg?

L\_\_\_\_: Yeah

[P 1: MEC 11\_09\_01 - 1:14]

Evidently, the ease of having similar others around on the college campus, not sticking out as one of a few ethnic minority students and 'not knowing how to act', was a strong pull factor for selecting this college. Participants' awareness of the hierarchical nature of ethnic and racial groupings in US society, therefore, was accompanied by the knowledge that as foreigners and persons of African ancestry they were at risk of being unfavorably different. Choosing to attend a Black college was a response to that social marginalization.

Participants on the other campus also spoke of being marginalized, which underscores how peripheral to the college community foreign-born students of color feel, even on an ethnically diverse campus:

P\_\_\_\_: There would be two of us in class and everybody else is Asian. In the English class. I mean, you can't understand, you know, what they're saying. And they're not friendly, they come in groups together. Everybody in their ethnic group and they just kind of leave you out there. And most of

the Black kids they went to like high school with their people so they kind of, you know, continue that kind of friendship into college.

[P 5: HC\_2\_13\_02 - 5:27]

This feeling of being left out of the group was common among participants on this campus. In fact, when the focus groups ended, some students would exchange numbers because they wanted the opportunity to stay in contact with other Caribbean students. Their marginality was evident in statements like, *“I felt so alienated in the entire school population. I just wanted to go home, go to class, go to work and go home”* [P7 HC 2\_20\_02 – 7:15]. Participants discussed the groupings on campus:

Tracy: Who hangs together on campus? Do the-- I mean, do you have friendships around majors or clubs or is it predominant that people hang together by ethnic group or where they come from, or what? What are the cliques like?

R\_\_\_\_: Like I did a year at Brooklyn College and I found that everybody was kind of like, separated. Like if you go in the cafeteria you have the Jews and you have the Blacks and you have Spanish and then people like me who just sit on their own. It's very, very different. Even in class it's something. Everybody has their friends that they sit with. No one really mixes.

Tracy: Does that apply here also?

[Chorus--agree]

R\_\_\_\_: Yeah. Definitely. In classes. Especially in classes.

D\_\_\_\_: I think it's especially difficult if you're an older student because I'm an older student. I think younger people are more open to building new friendships ... Oh, the other thing is that like I don't think I can be really good friends with people who aren't at least West Indian. So, like my good friends are all West Indians ... My friends who I've met here, well, actually, it's just one [laughter], who I would say is a friend, she is St. Lucian and so I can't-- I don't know, it's me relating to people. As an older student and as a West Indian, I can't...

Tracy: Right. So school friends are school friends.

R\_\_\_\_: Like you go into class and you meet somebody, if you miss a day you can call her.

Tracy: What do you think, Mi\_\_\_\_? What were the cliques like when you were here? Or what were they like in your old days? You graduated last year.

Mi\_\_\_\_: It's pretty much as R\_\_\_\_ described it. People typically stay in their cliques, whether it's by nationality or race or whatever it is. I have a few friends that I met here but it's always easier to be more comfortable with people who you think have something in common with. Or there's something about them that's familiar in terms of geographic region that you're from somewhere close to you or have some kind of related experience to you or something like that. I did try to have some friends who aren't like from my geographic region, or my color and something like that but I found that didn't really last far beyond school. [Laughter] I don't know if it was on my part because I'm not a phone person who's

gonna call you every two days to talk. Maybe it was my fault, so I don't know about that.

[P 5: HC\_2\_13\_02 - 5:27]

Two of the participants quoted above imply their individual personality characteristics may be the reason they have not formed cross-group friendships on campus. However, the fact that many such friendships did not exist between these students and students who were from other ethnic backgrounds reflects the state of race relations in America. It is often the case that no-one is eager to form friendships outside their group, resulting in continued separation and exclusion. To deal with the feeling of marginality, students seek out members of their own group, seeming to choose to be marginalized with similar others rather than being marginalized individuals.

The marginality voiced by participants across the two campuses is not the classic marginalization as defined by Park (1928), where marginalized persons feel as if they belong to neither the dominant group nor to their own minority group. In this case, most participants demonstrated that being with members of their own ethnic and cultural group was a desirable alternative to the feeling that they did not fit in to the dominant group. This was true whether they were members of a predominantly Black student population, where the White, dominant group to which they did not belong was located in the wider society outside the college, or part of an ethnically diverse college populated by members of the dominant group. This distinction is important and suggests that for Caribbean-born college students, Park's theory may not fully explain the marginality they experienced from immigration. While the data confirms their marginalization, the margin within which they are located is their racial and cultural group membership. Rather than being a

second point of unbelonging, their minority group membership emerges as a chosen space.

No analysis of marginality among Caribbean immigrants, however, would be complete without considering the impact of social class distinctions on feelings of belonging experienced by members of this group. Limited secondary educational opportunities in their home countries, the disproportionate representation of Caribbean women in US jobs not requiring a college degree, and persistently narrow traditional definitions of women's roles have resulted in a relatively small number of Caribbean immigrant women being college students. Therefore, while Caribbean women experience affiliation with others who are engaged in the pursuit of a degree, the connection is less smooth between them and Caribbean women with less education. In the focus groups, I asked participants what they thought of the label "non-traditional students" used to describe students who are more than 24 years old, first-generation college students, usually a member of an ethnic minority group and employed, sometimes with children of their own. In the quote that follows the participant clarifies, from the immigrant community's perspective, that the women who do go to college are the non-traditional ones; they are the ones who are different.

D\_\_\_\_: ... when Caribbean women come to New York, I don't think they come to baby-sit, and I don't know what the percentage is because I haven't done any studies on the percentage of Black women who leave the Caribbean islands and come to New York, seek a degree and beyond. I wish I had numbers on that, but it would probably be one or two percent who get graduate degrees or beyond undergrad degrees. But a lot of sisters

that I'm aware do housekeeping, baby care, elder care, and they're quite happy. They earn tax-free dollars, and they do a lot of work. So the non-traditional people end up in college. They make up a maybe one or two percent and power to them because they would be the future leaders of the other women who are here and hopefully, they can influence those other women to enter college and get a degree beyond common sense, you know. I try to generate interest in my friends who are non-degree students and they tell me, "Oh, it is too much work. I can't—I'm over thirty-five. I don't have time for that. My brain cells must be dead by now." You know, and they give up before they even begin.

Tracy: And most of these were powerful women in their own countries, in their own circles.

D\_\_\_: I don't know how powerful they were because many of the women right in New York City, if you do a random check of women pushing White babies in carriages, they really didn't come from that, and I think that ambition and drive and motivation to support their families back home is what brings them here in the first place. ... But there are some clever Black females who do night work and study by day. I met a few of them, and they were on the Dean's List. So they are about .5 percent.

Tracy: (laugh) A smaller—

D\_\_\_: Uh huh. A point five [.5] But there is hope. There is hope that, maybe, in studies like this, that people who are participants, can maybe, be mobilized to get non-undergraduates working towards maybe—what you call it--

continuing ed or something. I try, but when they get stuck in a rut, it is easy to go two blocks down the street and clean somebody's house and they get paid tax free. It's mine—

Tracy: Right. And they have more money to spend than you who are going to school, right?

D\_\_\_\_: Yup! You know, I know of women, at least four women, who came to New York City. No education beyond—what you call it-- primary school, and they were able to work for tax-free money and build homes, buy homes, and you with your graduate post-doc, you're doing a fifteen-dollar an hour job and these women are taking home more money than you are. It hurts. It is not fair. It hurts.

[P 6: HC 2\_19\_02 - 6:10]

In this student's comment we hear a complicated mix of admiration, support and exasperation as she discusses the immigrant women who have not chosen academics as their primary route to success. In her everyday life outside of school she encounters women from her community who seem to be like her but who, in some important ways, could not be more different. Not only are they not in college, but the route they have chosen is allowing them to acquire the material gains she does not have. In an atmosphere where the dominant attitude is to strive for better, she knows it is not immediately clear to those around her how she is being bettered by attending college. She also sees the ways in which they are better off than she is – in very real and immediate terms. This within-group marginality runs along class lines.

There are other ways in which the students experience marginality. Those from countries with fewer students feel as if they don't fit in to the Caribbean student community. For example, on each campus there was one participant from Dominica. Both these women mentioned feeling marginalized: one because there were only five students on her campus from her home country; and the other because she resented hearing students from the larger Caribbean islands refer to her country as a "small island". In addition, this participant complained that while she was educated about the history and accomplishments of the other Caribbean islands, all she ever encountered from other Caribbean nationals was unapologetic ignorance about her country, Dominica.

Another site of within-group marginality experienced by participants was language. Students who participated in the study were from countries in the English-speaking Caribbean, with the exception of those from Haiti. For this group, the fact that English was not their first language increased the difficulty of their college experience, in classes, as well as in social situations:

Tracy: So first let's just talk about what it's like to be a student at Medgar Evers College?

A\_\_\_\_: Who's gonna start?

Tracy: It's not in any order, just ... (laugh)

A\_\_\_\_: All right, Ok I'll go first. You know being a bilingual student is like kind of hard. At the beginning it was really hard for me to comprehend the English language. The way I was taught in Haiti is basically different than here. In Haiti, most of them we just have to memorizing, and here it's just

like mostly research. O.K., let me give you an example: If I study something I expect to know it by heart in Haiti, but here it's like different.

Tracy: More interpretation?

A\_\_\_\_: Exactly ... It's totally different.

Tracy: The language is a big difference and the approach to learning because you're saying back home we learn by rote, that's what we call in Jamaica, by rote meaning that you remember it and repeat it.

A\_\_\_\_: There we did not have to do a lot of research, not as far as I remember.

Tracy: Anybody else?

S\_\_\_\_: I just want to add something. My point is kind of similar to what she just said about the studying. The differences, you know, in here you have to meet different people, back home it's just all Haitian we're all Haitian, we know about each other, but in there's Jamaican, Trinidadian, you know all kinds of different culture and you have to face it. Sometimes, some people, you know, they have different kinds of attitude and since they're in your class, you can not ignore it but you have to face, you know. So for me the difference is just meeting those different kinds of culture, it's kind of-- not hard, but you know before when you first started coming here in college, it's true that the language was kind of difficult like you don't really understand everything that's going on, and then you've been in a class where sometimes only you that's Haitian or two of us is Haitian, some of them speak the language better than you and you just came, you

know and everybody else they already know what they are talking about,  
it was really frustrating and then I think it was hard at the beginning, yeah.

[P 3: MEC 11\_14\_02 3:30 pm - 3:20]

The preceding quote illustrates the complexities of within-group heterogeneity that is revealed through language differences. Although people from the Caribbean share common histories, post-colonial differences such as language, food and cultural practices impede the flow of trade, migration, and other forms of co-operative contact among neighboring countries. When Caribbean nationals immigrate to the US and encounter each other in setting such as educational institutions, it is not easy to overcome the ways in which their disparate legacies impact the quality of their relationships. In the following excerpt, witness the way these historical interruptions are mirrored in the group dynamics, discursive patterns, and content of the discussion in this group:

Tracy: Let's talk about the more social aspects of college life now because those are some really big difficulties in the class room, and I know that it's not just in the class room that you don't feel understood, but what about interacting with other students on campus? For example, when you were in Haiti did you feel like a Caribbean person in Haiti, and then you're here do you feel like a Caribbean person on campus or-- is there any change in your identity, or you view yourself? Yes, [directly to R\_\_\_\_] you were nodding your head, jump in

R\_\_\_\_: Yes, because when I am home I feel like, ahm [pause]

Tracy: You feel like a Caribbean person instead of like a Haitian person back home?

R\_\_\_\_: Yes, Haitian person but here there is a difference.

Tracy: How is it different?

R\_\_\_\_: Because you don't speak the same way as the others and, there is a big difference, I can't explain it but there is a big difference.

Tracy: Yeah? So say it in Creole and then they'll tell me what you are saying, [laughter] or I can have a Creole translator. [Pause] See, everybody doesn't feel the difference, maybe you feel the difference, they don't ... so what do you mean it's different?

Chorus: Go ahead. Tell her.

A\_\_\_\_: Go ahead "di l an Kreyol". [say it in Creole]

R\_\_\_\_: Ok

A\_\_\_\_: Tankou nan ki sans? [In what sense]?

R\_\_\_\_: Tankou nan Medgar a la, deske mwen gen lot zanmi m ki pale Angle, yo pa vreman close ansanm ave m bikoz yo pa konprann defwa le m ap pale. [At Medgar I have other friends who speak English, but they are not close to me because they don't really understand me.]

A\_\_\_\_: An Kreyol oubyen Angle? [When you speak Creole or English ?]

R\_\_\_\_: Le m ap pale Angle yo pa konprann mwen e sa k fe mwen plis kote ki gen zanmi Ayisyen ke lot nasyon. [When I speak English they don't understand me, that's why I stay more with Haitian friends than friends from other countries.]

[P 3: MEC 11\_14\_02 3:30pm - 3:21]

Even in the focus group discussion, this Haitian participant had to resort to Creole to fully express her feelings about relating to persons who were not Haitian. This is doubly complicated because, having encouraged her to speak, when she did so in the language with which she was most comfortable, I (whose only language is English) could not understand her. When she finished speaking, other Haitians in the group translated what she had said and the discussion continued. A Haitian transcriber provided the translation in parentheses, which is consistent with the translation provided by the participants. However, this was a moment in the research process where the actual scene encapsulated the participants' lived experience: it is so much trouble to communicate across language barriers that sometimes, it is better not to bother. It is not always this simple, however, depending on what is at stake, and for whom. On that campus, there were many other Haitian students with whom to form friendships so the fact that language was a barrier to forming friendships with others who do not speak her language is regrettable but not largely detrimental. In the research setting, I was conscious of the value of including her perspective in my study, so I worked hard to facilitate her input, despite the unmistakable discomfort for her and for me in that moment. In a classroom setting, however, when communication breaks down between a professor and student, the student has more to lose when she is not understood or when she does not understand what is being taught. In that context, the student stands to pay the highest price of all for her marginality.

In the preceding section I presented evidence from the data indicating students' marginality based on their race and ethnicity, and within-group marginality based on country of origin, social class and language. We see that these social statuses sometimes function as sites of unbelonging and affect participants' experience as immigrants and as students. However, hooks identifies the margin as a site of both repression and resistance. She writes:

Black folks coming from poor, underclass communities, who enter universities or privileged cultural settings unwilling to surrender every vestige of who we were before we were there, all "sign" of our class and cultural "difference", who are unwilling to play the role of "exotic Other", must create spaces within that culture of domination if we are to survive whole, our souls intact. Our very presence is a disruption . . . Without such spaces we would not survive (hooks, 1990; p. 148).

Similarly, Unger (2000) asserts that those who experience oppression will be unable to act for change if they fail to see the possibility of effecting change. The change that is possible for themselves and for other members of their marginalized group may best be generated in the spaces such as hooks described, those places where the very characteristics that are considered by outsiders to be undesirable are nurtured and celebrated by members of the group. Conversely, when group members focus only on the deprivation of marginality they court apathy and the death of their creative urges and acts of activism. Taken together, these theories provide a powerful framework for understanding how individuals and groups might withstand the effects of marginalization. It is in this spirit that the remainder of this chapter will be focused on participants'

survival responses to their marginality and will identify those spaces within which evidence of resistance among the group may be found. Please refer to Table 1 for the four characteristics of positive marginality that have been gleaned from the theories presented by hooks and Unger.

### **Positive Marginality: Re-conceiving “Stigma” as Being Favorable**

As was discussed before, being of African ancestry and hence, not a member of the dominant group in the US, is a site of marginality for Caribbean immigrant women. However, in the focus groups conducted on the campus of predominantly Black students, there was evidence that as participants became more aware of their Black identity, they saw value in that group membership.

M\_\_\_\_: Black people have, you know, we grew up with the European standards of beauty – slender nose, blond hair, blue eyes, whatever, whatever, and everything White is right and Black is negative, right? So, I grew up with a big nose complex. Oh God, my nose is so big. You go through high school. Is only people telling you about you nose. You know when you go through high school, you-- everybody makes fun of you, you have to have real guts like a calabash to take what you go through in high school. So then when you come here now, and you get more conscious of your Blackness, and in some of the classes, the professors, they're Afrocentric. They dress like that, and they teach you more about your Blackness. You get to love your nose and your lips and your face and your butt and your hips--

I\_\_\_\_: Love yourself—

M\_\_\_\_: -- and everything. You know, you get to be a strong, proud Black woman. So that when you're among these White people and maybe you're the only raisin among them, and plus you're educated, you could hang in with their circle and talk. You know, when they "Oh I've been to Harvard", and this, that, and the other, you could relate and you could talk with them too and you don't feel so out of place. So you know, Medgar makes me more conscious as a Black person.

Chorus: Yeah

[P 2: MEC 11\_14\_01 10:00 am - 2:13]

Being students of a Black college bolstered their image of themselves as being on par with everyone else, even members of the dominant group educated at an Ivy League college. This strong sense of belonging even translated to the way participants felt about their physical appearance. Evidently, this positive Black self concept and group identity was explicitly fostered by the ideology and practices of that college, and also by students looking around them and seeing themselves in the majority, at least while they are on campus:

B\_\_\_\_: And I admire that a lot about Medgar Evers College and the fact that we're all here and ahm, we feel uplifted. Everyday I come in here I feel uplifted because, it's a warm environment, and ahm, yes, in the racial thing, it's still around us but we don't go through it at Medgar.

[P 2: MEC 11\_14\_01 10:00 am - 2:13]

There was a very strong sense from these participants that, once inside the college environment, they were secure in their racial identity. However, because this was a Black school struggling to retain its status as a senior college, there was stigma associated with being students of that college. The discussions revealed that participants were aware of the marginalizing labels held by the college and many had enrolled with the plan to transfer to another, more reputable, university. However, not all students followed through on their plans to transfer:

Sh\_\_\_: Before I wanted to transfer I didn't know what I wanted thus far. When I first started here, I heard so much about Medgar Evers you know, some people they have a bad— uh, how can I put it? --reputation about, yes, and then you know what makes me sad one day because I had to go physical therapy or something , that's when I first came here, I don't even remember where it was but the only thing I know I took the train and then they gave me the address and then I went there, but it was kind of far, but I can remember now where was that and then the doctor he asked me, oh do you go to school, I say yes, and then which school you go to? I say Medgar Evers and then—but he was White, and he was like, “Medgar Evers, where is it?” I said, “In Brooklyn”. He said, “Medgar Evers, I never heard about that school”. [Tracy: Oh no.] [ N\_\_\_:uh huh, uh huh] He named all the other schools that you know: Brooklyn College, blah, blah, blah. And he said, “Medgar Evers, I never heard about Medgar Evers, how long has it been, you know? I am like, “Well it's been here for

a while". [Tracy: It's a whole school!] [A\_\_\_\_: But not everybody knows]

So I am like, "It's a good school."--

N\_\_\_\_: -- I am going to put some words into this, I have a friend of mine that right now is thinking of going to do his Ph.D., he asked me where I am going to school, I said Medgar Evers, he said, Oh N\_\_\_\_, why are you going there? Don't you know that if you want to go to other schools, let's say for instance you graduate from there maybe they will not accept your credits? For the simple fact that Medgar Evers is not really well known because only Blacks go there. No, ahm [pause], other nations-- which is referring to White people. I said well, don't you know that school is a very hard one? It could be Black, ok fine, but it's the hardest school ever. Because I was in Kingsborough, Kingsborough was very easy, but here, forget it. He said, well, why don't you go to LIU or York College, Queens College and everything. I said, well, why can't I say here, what difference does it make? It still—I'm getting what I want, you know. He said well, I don't know, but you don't really put that school into the level--

Sh\_\_\_\_: --And that's one of the reasons why I wanted to transfer before. Too many people, you know, kept on talking that Medgar Evers is not a good school and you're not guaranteed-- when you finish you're not going to have a job, and blah, blah, blah..., so and I am like as you know years go by and then I said Ok I wanted to challenge those things, I want to stay here finish, graduate and see if I am not going to get a job.

A\_\_\_\_: I heard it too but it's not true.

Sh\_\_\_: Yeah, that's the reason why I stay, but before I had the idea of transferring to another school.

Tracy: You were more persuaded by what you heard?

Sh\_\_\_: Yeah, but now, uh uh.

N\_\_\_: Back then it was a community college but now it is a senior college. Back then it was a community but not nowadays, forget it. And that's why I think it's becoming more hard than anything else because some people up there they don't take it as a real, real college. That's why they are making it very difficult for us.

Tracy: Ok, so that by the time you graduate they know that you are really prepared?

N\_\_\_: Yeah

A\_\_\_: And then I found out we have good teachers here too. We do. Some of them they're just kind of busy but most of them they know their stuff.

Sh\_\_\_: Oh yeah, they do.

[P 3: MEC 11\_14\_02 330pm - 3:23]

These students had chosen the margin by attending a Black college where the majority of students were just like them – Caribbean immigrants. By challenging the stereotypes associated with their social group and their school, they gained strength and their sense of worth was increased. This generalized group honor was not evident among participants on the other campus where, although the student population was ethnically diverse, the Caribbean students were a relatively small number among a numerical

minority of students of African ancestry. On that campus, some Caribbean-born students remained isolated and did not associate with others from their region, since they said the Caribbean students did not portray a positive group image on campus.

De \_\_\_\_: I think West Indians do get together but I don't have a whole lot of regard for the Caribbean Student's Union here. If I'm a member, I've never been to anything, it's just because when I first came here my first instinct was to find out about the group and I went and I met a couple of people but then most of them are young—

Ra \_\_\_\_: They're not about anything.

Mi \_\_\_\_: It's a social thing.

De \_\_\_\_: Yeah, it's a social thing. They all range from eighteen to twenty-one and so all they're interested in is partying—

Mi \_\_\_\_: It's just a social hang-out place. Some place you go—

De \_\_\_\_: — at this point in time in my life. I don't really. I mean I know a couple of people but nothing—

Mi \_\_\_\_: I found the same experience at that club that you did. When I just got here I signed up, went like once, took a look around and I was like, okay, I'm never coming back.

Ra \_\_\_\_: I didn't sign up but they're usually by the cafeteria. I saw the big radio and they were playing calypso and dancing and that was my indication of what's it's gonna be like [laughter] so I never did go in the end.

[P 5: HC\_2\_13\_02 - 5:27]

Despite the negative perception of the club held by some students, the Caribbean Student Union emerged as an important space for other Caribbean students on that campus. Club members reported having actively searched for the club in an effort to find other students from their background. One student describes how the loneliness she felt as a freshman, away from home and her friends drove her to find the club:

J\_\_\_\_: I'm going around the school with my three-hour gap in between my class, I have nowhere to go. So I asked people, I went out of my way and I asked people, where's the Caribbean Club. "Where you hear the dominoes knocking, go." [Laughter] I looked and I searched for the dominoes, I didn't hear anything ... I have no friends. All my friends are in Jamaica. I have all kinds of things to deal with. 'Cause you're getting used to the country itself, and I just feel like a school like this needs to do more student activities that are geared toward making people feel more comfortable in school. ...maybe I would have met one friend or whatever but for that whole semester it was me and my bag and my job and I went home and I went on the phone for days talking to my friends back home.

Tracy: Until you got that phone bill, right?

J\_\_\_\_: Oh my gosh! Let me tell you. It was rough. But these student clubs, they provide a certain atmosphere where people feel comfortable.

[P 7: HC\_2\_20\_02 - 7:15]

Another participant described her search for the club and the positive effect that Club membership had on her:

Sy\_\_\_: I was young. I was only like, 16 when I came here and everybody was like, so much older. They don't give a shit about anything. I was like totally—my only comfort, I guess was I said to myself you know what? This is a big school in New York City. I'm getting used to New York City but there must be some Caribbean place somewhere. I was like, where's the Caribbean Club? I went around the school asking everybody I could see blazing colors, you know, the red, green and thing. I'd say, Yo, where's the Caribbean Club? And when I went to the Caribbean Club I met some people there. I've been in there since my first semester. Basically, that's been my only means of actually dealing. And then you know, in the club, there are other people there who have gone through experiences who can help you with classes, who can help you with whatever. So you know, I gained a lot of friends with the club and it's helped me with other stuff too but you know, it was a big jump.

[P 7: HC\_2\_20\_02 - 7:15]

Not only did these participants speak of the community membership and sharing that they enjoyed in the club, they also described it as a space where their identity is maintained and strengthened. Club members admitted they were not always productive while they were in the club. When they had free time between classes, sometimes they'd just be hanging out playing dominoes or spades or listening to music.

Tracy: So is it good? Is it a good thing? I'm hearing mixed things.

Tk\_\_\_: I think it's therapeutic

Sy\_\_\_: It is

An\_\_\_: It's a stress relief, OK?

Tk\_\_\_: It's a place where you can go and you don't have to fight up with your dialect. Nothing like that. You go and you be yourself. You kicks off on a Jamaican, you joke off on a Guyanese. Everybody is one, you understand where I'm coming from? You're not fighting with the culture shock that may be taking place in West Building and wherever else you have classes. That little space 312? Put all your guards down and fine. So I don't think—sometime it's yeah, it's wasting time but sometimes it's being in touch with yourself again. And not losing your cultural identity. You know.

[P7: HC 2\_20\_02 - 7:17]

These comments about their membership in the Caribbean Students' Union illustrate the value of having a space to come together with other students from their cultural background. On this campus where they were in the numerical minority, the club gave students a place to be away from the alienating features of the larger campus and reaffirm their cultural value together.

The distinctive accent is a characteristic that readily identifies a Caribbean person. When participants spoke of not fitting in, besides feeling marginalized because of their race, they repeatedly mentioned their accents as a major source of their marginality.

Sy\_\_\_: I said something to somebody and they were like, what? I said it again and they're like, what? And I was like, what the hell is wrong with you? I'm

saying the thing properly. And I just couldn't get it. I just couldn't understand that they just couldn't understand my accent.

An\_\_\_: It's the accent—

Sy\_\_\_: How could they not understand my accent? I'm speaking clear English!

Tracy : They're not listening

An\_\_\_: Listen to me. A New Yorker can tell when you're not a New Yorker.

Sy\_\_\_: Exactly

An\_\_\_: Every semester I have that problem. OK, where are you from? You're from the West Indies? Which country? And I'll be like, what are you talking about? Your accent. They pick up on it.

Sy\_\_\_: No, I know they pick up the accent but I'm talking English. It's not like I'm talking in my patois. I'm talking in proper English, just like I'm talking right here.

An\_\_\_: To you it's like proper English, to them, it's like, what the hell is she saying?

Sy\_\_\_: [shrilly] That's what I'm saying! That's what I'm trying to say. But why?

J\_\_\_: My first semester here, you're afraid to talk in class, you know. I had that English class, woi! And you know when you're talking and the professor says, "Excuse me, I didn't understand you." And you're like, "Oh God!"

[P 7: HC\_2\_20\_02 - 7:17]

To speak and not be understood is an emotionally laden experience for some students. Students' responses to this experience varied: Some students spoke of not

wanting to speak up in class to avoid embarrassing moments; others modified the way they spoke in an effort to make themselves understood; and others refused to accommodate the listener, insisting that nothing was wrong with what they were saying, it was the listener who needed to adjust. The following quote is taken from the discussion started above, and illustrates the tension between participants in this group as they discussed how they dealt with this aspect of their marginality.

Mi\_\_\_: You have to go slowly

Sy\_\_\_: I was the total opposite. I spoke in class, I was very outspoken in class and everybody knew that was Sy\_\_\_. She's from Jamaica, she's whatever, you know? They knew me because I was up in their face. I found that now I have toned down and the classes I'm taking are a lot bigger, so you can't really be up in everybody's face like that. But they – the first time I ever spoke, they were like, Oh, where are you from, because I heard an accent. But they understood me. I just couldn't understand that person not understanding me. What the hell is wrong with these people?

J\_\_\_: Some people are just blinded by the accent.

Tk\_\_\_: They just don't want to go past it.

J\_\_\_: Yes, they don't want to go past the accent but I think the accent-- I don't care where you're from, which Caribbean country you're from, as soon as you get here you're going to try to speak the best English you could possibly speak just because you want to be accepted. Because if I was speaking patois in here -- well, not in here but in my class -- and I'd be talking to my teacher like [unintelligible chatter], they'd be like, huh?

[P 7: HC\_2\_20\_02 - 7:17]

Like the last speaker, there were many participants who spoke of the utility of modifying their speech to facilitate communication. They made this adjustment to ease the frustrations of not being understood. However, there were more participants who felt strongly that they should not have to adjust. Most participants maintained their distinctive accents because it was so strongly associated with their social identity:

A\_\_\_\_: I know a lot of people who don't even want other people to know that they are Haitians. I don't-- wherever I go, I'm Haitian. Well, some people think that I sound Jamaican sometimes, others think that I have a big accent. I know I have a big accent. Wherever I go here, I am Haitian, I don't have any problem, why should I be ashamed of my precedent or culture or background?

Sh\_\_\_\_: And if you look at it in general, everybody does have an accent.

Tracy: Exactly.

A\_\_\_\_: Right.

Sh\_\_\_\_: Everybody does. One may be stronger than the other, but everybody does.

So if you're still looking at your accent you will never, never, move on.

[P 3: MEC 11\_14\_02 330pm - 3:25]

Although their race, ethnic background and their accents were sites of marginality, this data demonstrates that some students were able to see these stigmatizing characteristics as being positive, valued aspects of themselves. Instead of denying these

aspects of themselves, participants claimed them and, in so doing, were better able to deal with the challenges of being foreign-born students of color living in America.

### **Positive Marginality: Recognizing Membership in a Larger Community**

Some women also indicated consciousness of their membership in a larger community of resistance, which hooks (1990) includes as one feature of the ability to choose the margin. There was no marked difference across the campuses in this regard. Women across the groups were very clear about their Caribbean identity, and there was evidence on both campuses of a consciousness of their membership in the larger Black community and the role it's history plays in their current experiences:

V\_\_\_\_: ... when I was in the Caribbean I used to think of myself as Caribbean, Caribbean, all the time. I know I'm Caribbean, but here it doesn't cross my mind. I'm just a Black person, you know.

Others: Yeah

V\_\_\_\_: When I just came, I used to feel like, you know, I don't belong. Like this is their country but now I feel that just like anybody else, I have the right just like anybody else. We all came here looking for something, so now, I'm more concrete now in how I think.

Tracy: So there's a shift. Back home you felt more Caribbean, but here—

V\_\_\_\_: I'm Black, I'm just Black

[P 2: MEC 11\_14\_01 10:00 am - 2:13]

From this participant's comment we see that for some students, this awareness of their membership in a larger community of stigmatized others within the US is an

emergent identity, which arose out of their experience as immigrants of color. There was strong evidence that many students learned from their own experiences of exclusion that people of African ancestry in the US joining together would result in a stronger, more effective community:

J \_\_\_\_: I'm just saying, I feel that there's so much that can be done in numbers.

I'm not saying we must preach hate. I'm totally against that because you're just doing what they did. They strung us up -- Oh, let's string up this White man; the same thing that they did to us. It doesn't make any sense to fight fire with fire. But you get more in numbers. If I were to go downstairs and start shouting, "Let's go and try to get more student-advising, yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" And I was the only one, no-one would listen to me. But if I got, say, twenty students to make that noise a little louder, then I would get some attention. So you fight for what you want and you have to know how to go about it.

An \_\_\_\_: That's true

J \_\_\_\_: You try to get the help of maybe—the White man too may want to help you because not all of them are bad. You work, you work, until you get where you want to go. But a lot of us tend to forget where we came from when we reach a certain stage ... But you really have to have an identity and I think a lot of people don't even know what they want and they want to be what they really are not. So I think that is what we struggle with on a daily basis.

Tracy: Who are you referring to when you say "we"?

J\_\_\_: We as Black people and even Caribbean people. Because they tell you, you go to school and study and when you become a doctor you can do this and you can do that.

[P 7: HC 2\_20\_02 - 7:19]

This belief in the value of joining together as a community was consistent across the groups. However, as was discussed in the chapter, *Experiencing Community and Difference*, there was variation in the nature of group cohesion desired, since only a few participants perceived themselves as being part of a global or Pan-African community, while others' sense of belonging was anchored in a regional, Caribbean community. Whether or not participants conceived of their community as extending to include all persons of African ancestry, they did recognize that the road to improving conditions among themselves lay in bonding with others to withstand external pressures:

Tracy: Before you go, what are some of the things, how do you think that we should— when I say 'we' I mean, people of color, women and Caribbean people-- What are some of the ways you think we should deal with some of the problems that we encounter in larger society, in school.

Ta\_\_\_: Help each other.

Tracy: We should help each other

Ta\_\_\_: Yes, because I realized certain things I didn't know from having people I could talk with.

Le\_\_\_: We just have to go back to community. It takes a village. Things like that, I think that is absolutely important. And then you take it into all your

social settings. I find that-- it is not a bad thing but I don't have White friends, I don't have Black American friends. All my friends are Caribbean. I have a tight network. And when you stop and think you need it. If I should lose that I wouldn't be anywhere. ...Everybody needs to have that. I'm not saying that it has to be a large community. It just has to be a community that supports one another. And that's what we need to go back to.

[P 8: HC 2\_26 and 3\_01\_02 Part I - 8:18]

This participant's definition of community as a core group of persons from her ethnic background reveals the radical positioning hooks (2000) describes as choosing the margin. According to hooks, sometimes marginalized persons do not desire to lose their marginality, instead, they recognize the margin as a central location from which to imagine and produce alternate realities. hooks' sentiments are echoed in this participant's belief that for immigrant students to help themselves and each other, they need a tight community of themselves, from which to build the supportive resources they need to operate in society.

### **Positive Marginality: Structure Influences Experience**

Unger (2000) argues that positive marginality promotes the awareness that injustice is rooted in structural processes rather than in personal inadequacy. In every focus group I conducted, participants were very critical of the services provided by people in central administrative offices, like student orientation, financial aid, academic

advising, and counseling. They spoke about the large classes, the unavailability of funding, and the general lack of information and misinformation that characterized their college experience. These students were very clear that to succeed on their campus, one had to make it one's business to figure out how to make it. However, some students had a very strong sense of personal responsibility in this regard, while others argued that the institution was not doing as much as it could be doing to facilitate their progress. The following series of quotes illustrates this tension:

Tracy: So you get a peer counselor and a – what's that other counselor?

An\_\_\_: Your real counselor

J\_\_\_: Who gets that though?

An\_\_\_: Freshmen. All freshmen get a counselor

J\_\_\_: I didn't have anybody

An\_\_\_: You went to the orientation?

J\_\_\_: I went to orientation but I went to one orientation and from that day—

An\_\_\_: They put you in Or Sem [Orientation Seminar] class?

J\_\_\_: No

An\_\_\_: Oh no, you came in as a transfer, that's why

J\_\_\_: But I was a freshman in a new school

An\_\_\_: Well, you should have signed up for Or Sem class.

J\_\_\_: How would I know that if no one tells me?

An\_\_\_: It's in the—

J\_\_\_: No, but come on. If you transfer to the school they should have told me.

I'm a freshman. Fresh in the school, fresh in the country, fresh in every sense and no one told me anything.

Sy\_\_\_: They should have told you that. They told me that. I went to the orientation seminar and I didn't go to the Or Sem class.

An\_\_\_: Well, I didn't go to the Or Sem. I went to the first class, I handed in my paper the end of the semester. I didn't go to class. That's a BS class.

Sy\_\_\_: Everybody knows that's a bullshit class ... [banging on the table] You know what I think? You know what I think? I seriously think that Hunter College's plan is to screw you over as much as possible so you have to spend so many years here so they can get your money. That's what I think.

J\_\_\_: It's not Hunter College alone.

An\_\_\_: They all do it. It's just that you got to have lip and you have to know someone in the system who can help you work the system.

[P:7 HC 2\_20\_02 - 7:14]

This sense that the university was out to get them, or at the very least, not support them, was a common sentiment expressed by students. Services providing information and guidance were perceived to be either not readily available or not useful. In every group, students complained a lot but the idea that "No one comes looking for you, you have to go seek it yourself" was dominant. They had to figure it out themselves if they were going to get the degree. Within that resignation, however, was a critical consciousness in some students who knew that if the circumstances were otherwise, their progress would

not be so difficult. As the discussion continues, we see hear students of this publicly funded university argue about obligation and detriment.

J \_\_\_\_: The thing about it is that there are like however many students here and probably one in every ten knows somebody who actually helps them. So you have nine tenths of the entire school population who has no clue. Up to their second year here they don't know their major, they don't know what to do with their courses, they don't know how many credits they need to graduate, they don't know anything. If they made it a priority for each student to see an advisor at least once a semester-- I don't think that's hard ... I mean, if they point out certain things to you and make you aware of certain things then you stand a better chance of knowing what you want to do. But they just leave you out there and you're just left by yourself, basically.

An \_\_\_\_: Is it a matter if leaving you by yourself? That's my question. Is it a matter of leaving you by yourself?

J \_\_\_\_: They left me by myself

An \_\_\_\_: OK. I have a few friends who already graduated, especially this one friend. It's not their job to come looking for you. She made it her job at the end of every semester, she didn't go to the peer counselor, she went to a counselor. She made it her business. She got out of here in 3 ½ years. Because she made it her business.

J \_\_\_\_: But An \_\_\_\_\_. How many students at Hunter have—...If each student had an idea when you initially come into the school that this is what you need to

do, this is who you need to see if you're interested in so-so-so, then I think that so many people would not be lost in the whole system. Because I was lost until I found myself. Which is why I am here an extra year.

An \_\_\_: I was lost. That's why I'm here an extra year too. But you can't compare it to back home because back home those teachers do give you that extra time. But you gotta remember, the amount of students they dealt with, compared with the amount of students in college is a very big difference, you understand what I'm saying?

[P:7 HC 2\_20\_02 - 7:14]

Being in school for an extra year is costly, plus, there is social stigma associated with not graduating on time. When students are not properly oriented to college procedure, they spend time taking classes they do not need for graduation and end up requiring extra time to complete the degree requirements. Also, students rarely understand that they need to take fifteen credits each semester in order to complete the 120 credits required for their degree, in four years. Many students start off taking twelve credits each semester, not realizing that at that rate, they'll either need to take classes in the summer or stay in school for an extra year to accumulate enough credits for graduation. All of this translates to significant costs for students. On the other hand, the reality is that most Caribbean immigrant students work to pay for their education and some have children of their own to take care of. Given these additional obligations, if they took fifteen credits each semester in an effort to complete the degree in four years, they are likely to fail and drop out. These are the lines imposed by the social and economic structure that are not taken into consideration when institutional and students

funding decisions are made based on student retention, grade point averages, and graduation rates. As the discussion continues, the focus shifts to the large class sizes:

J \_\_\_\_: ... why is it that you should have really difficult classes, classes like calculus, organic chemistry, classes like that that the world knows—I had a class with 157 students in my organic chemistry class. By the end of the semester it went down to 83 students. That's at least half of the entire class population that either withdrew or just dropped it. Now, why is it that they couldn't try to squeeze some extra money and get another professor who would have more one to one contact? Because a lot of students don't do well in classes that size.

An \_\_\_\_: That's not the thing you know, because I questioned that with my econ professor and the psych department. It's not a matter of them squeezing money, it's what the government gives the school and they have to work with that budget. And unless the government gives them more money, they can't hire any more teachers. You see those tenured professors? You gotta pay them. That's why they hire adjuncts.

J \_\_\_\_: You know why I think that's so much crap? You have one of two choices. You have a lot of schools here and I'm not saying turn back a lot of people and stuff like that but it is ridiculous, it is absolutely ridiculous that if you want people to succeed in school for you to have a class such as calculus—I had calculus with a hundred and something students—why you going to have a difficult class like that with—and I had no recitation—a hundred and something students in a calculus class?

Sy\_\_\_: This is me. That's why I do a lot of classes over the summer because you get smaller classes in the summer. If you look at my transcript from summer to the semesters—I'm getting straight A's in the summer, right? And in the semester I'll be getting A's and B's.

An\_\_\_: Yes, there are less students in the summer and the work is condensed but it's easier. ... And I did much better in the summer because it's less students and the professor gave—'cause there were about 10 students in the summer class, 10 students. And you're there every day, so you get through better.

Mi\_\_\_: Can I say something? Isn't that a good example of what she's trying to say? When you have a smaller class where there is more concentration on the students and more focus you tend to do better? But the way the system is now it's kinda set up for you to fail because there is no recourse.

J\_\_\_: that's all I was trying to say.

[P:7 HC 2\_20\_02 - 7:14]

These are not the circumstances that define the college experience of students who attend well-funded universities. Ironically, the social class distinctions that determine which students attend public institutions are mirrored in national statistics of unemployed and uneducated persons. When these first-generation college students who are from working class, immigrant families fail and drop out of school their fate is consistent with probability. Conversely, when they excel, public discourse credits the educational system and institutions for educating them, despite the odds. In this conversation we hear the students discuss the enormous personal effort involved in their

educational pursuits and their awareness of the external constraints which may influence their chances of success.

### **Positive Marginality: Social Responsibility**

Finally, Unger (2000) and hooks (1990) both maintain that positive marginality promotes a vision of collective as well as individual responsibility for social change. Students in the focus groups were not activists in the formal sense. No participants mentioned being members of established community or national organizations but a few were members of interest groups such as the Psychology Club and the Caribbean Students Union. However, there was evidence among participants of small actions geared toward social and political goals. For example, a participant invited me to attend the next meeting of the Psychology Club to talk to the group about the process of applying to graduate school. When she thanked me for coming, she mentioned they especially appreciated my presence, since they had no psychology professors who were of color or from the Caribbean.

Vigorous, systematic action on behalf of a group was evident in one participant who was involved in an effort to revive the then defunct International Students Council at her college.

M\_\_\_\_: The international student's club hasn't been active so we're trying to start the club back up right now. We got a stipend, \$2,000 so that is there for us. We have decided to raise funds to put with it to help with tuition and stuff for next semester. But we need more foreign students to come to meetings.

L\_\_\_\_: How come I haven't heard anything about that?

M\_\_\_: Leticia has to send out the information (laughs). I don't know why she hasn't sent it out but I've been telling her we need the club to get active so we can start working on it.

L\_\_\_: But that's what we've been waiting for, to hear from the international students' council.

M\_\_\_: Yes. The money is there but we can't just take the \$2,000 that he gave and just give it away. That's the scholarship fund so we have to raise more money to build on it. So we need all the foreign students to come together and be active

Tracy: So do you have a faculty member? Like, a professor who advises the international students association?

M\_\_\_: Letisha, she's new. So we have to be advising her on what she's supposed to do and how to go about it. And they have elections coming up on Wednesday for the foreign student club. In club hour.

L\_\_\_: Where do you all meet?

M\_\_\_: N15. So now we have to get a president, a secretary, a treasurer...

L\_\_\_: We've been waiting to hear word and not hearing anything.

M\_\_\_: I know. So that money is there for the foreign students. We just have to raise on it, like throw a party or something and raise— So next semester, this semester we can plan now for next semester, we can plan the party and give out some money. And keep a budget so it [the balance] doesn't go under a certain amount.

L\_\_\_: OK

M\_\_\_\_: So we need people who can think and do— you know, we need good people.

Tracy: So what's your role in that? Are you running for president?

M\_\_\_\_: That's what I was planning to do because I know more about the finances and stuff. I want other people, strong people who will really be active, to come and run for positions.

[P 1: MEC 11\_09\_01 - 1:17]

The interest shown by the other person participating in the discussion quoted above suggests that the return of the International Students Council was long anticipated and desired. The fact that this group is flagging on this campus is remarkable because, of the freshmen admitted to that college in 2001, 53% were born outside the US (CUNY Facts, 2001). In contrast, on the other campus (where 44% of 2001 freshmen were foreign-born) members of the Caribbean Students Union claim their group is flourishing and productive.

Tk\_\_\_\_: I believe in the saying that there is power in numbers and with us rallying together as Caribbean Students' Union. And we have made a mark on campus. There's no denying that Caribbean Students' Union has the best activities on campus. There's no denying that the majority of us have scholarships, academically we excel, that kind of thing. And because we group together, we get respect on campus. You know, people coming to ask, so what's the Caribbean Club doing?

[P7: HC 2\_20\_02 - 7:17]

Students who are members of The Caribbean Students Union reported that their participation in that organization led to their being active in other areas. For example, one of the students who was quoted earlier as saying she walked around the campus looking for the club, reported that finding the club was the beginning of her doing more for herself and for others:

J\_\_\_\_: That was my first step. And like now, after you get comfortable in the club you take on a position. You do more things. After that, Tk\_\_\_\_ and myself, now we know where Undergraduate Student Government is and now we go and we even said we want to get involved. Now we're senators. So you know, you do stuff like that and believe me, if I wasn't that comfortable in the club, which made me comfortable in school, I would never even achieve, or get focused or even know about the MARC<sup>1</sup> program. It was somebody in the club who told me about the MARC program, stuff like that. So it's good in that sense.

[P 7: HC 2\_20\_02 - 7:16]

Apart from those students who were in established groups, some individuals were involved in small acts in their daily life, which they did not consider to be activism, but which may be identified as contributing to social progress. For example, one participant helped her family raise money to benefit people in their community back home, and every year they conducted a clothes drive for that purpose. Another participant wrote for

publication in the student paper an article detailing useful strategies for getting around quota restrictions on classes. Yet another student said she wanted to write a guidebook for foreign-born students, to help them plan for and deal with the changes they would encounter. Another student led a sit-in at the dean's office that resulted in the cap being lifted for a class and eighteen students registered for a class from which they had been shut out. Other students spoke of the importance that they do well in school since it will make their families proud, set an example for younger members of their families, or put them in a position to help someone else. The following quote illustrates this view:

Tracy: Do you think it that it's worth it?

D\_\_\_\_: Oh, yes. Oh yes, it's definitely worth it for me, because even when I worked in geriatrics for a while, and everybody thought I was a social worker. So people know that I had some amount of knowledge that I could share with them, and whenever we had meetings, I would be able to share, if it's nutrition, some facts on nutrition or health or some kind of something on political activity or community activity. These women just were like sponges. They just sucked up what I had to tell them. So it is worth something. Definitely, it is worth something. I'm not in this for the money, and I know that I won't be paid my value, in the end. But it's worth something to me. I can help my mom, my sisters, their children, their neighbors, their friends. I can help people. If I didn't have this college degree, I wouldn't do half the things I do. So it's worth something. Not the big bucks, but something.

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<sup>1</sup> The MARC Program provides financial and academic support to outstanding ethnic minority students who are science majors. The goal of this program is to increase minority student enrollment in graduate

[P 6: HC 2\_19\_02 - 6:10]

### **Conclusion**

The data presented illustrates three points: First, there are features of the US social and academic environment that contribute to Caribbean women's marginalization. Second, positive marginality helps students to withstand the effects of marginalization. And third, cultural resources promote resilience – an atmosphere or spaces on campus where Caribbean women's cultural identity is supported and valued will facilitate positive marginality and hence, enhance their adjustment.

In a critical literature review written prior to conducting this study, I despaired of psychology's ability to capture transformation in the margins. I wrote:

In the early 1990's, Fine and Gordon acknowledged of psychologists: "We have yet to develop a language for articulating that which is negotiated in between structures of oppression and individual/group psychologies" (1992; p. 24). That in-between space or margin is a troublesome dimension, as is illustrated by the focus of this review. The lives of individuals; cultural influences; the collective struggle and support of community; and the constraints of institutions and social structure border this space. Today, psychologists remain without an adequate language for discussing individual and collective struggle against social constraints.

At risk of losing the right to carry my "cynical junior scholar" card, I confess I believe we are getting closer to acquiring this language.

I do have some problems with the concept, positive marginality: Does it need another name that does not seem to imply that marginalized persons should be positive (i.e., less pessimistic), or that marginality is, in essence, a positive experience or, at the very least, not so bad for you? Furthermore, the research Unger conducted to develop the theory of positive marginality was based on White professionals who had potentially stigmatizing social characteristics that were not visible. As the data presented here illustrates, the stigmas associated with Caribbean immigrant women are readily recognizable and hence, the group faces some significantly different issues of marginality than the group Unger studied. More work needs to be done to capture other dimensions of the experience not addressed by the current study.

However, the theory does provide a valuable framework for thinking through the complexities of resistance for a group of foreign-born ethnic minority women who are negotiating a privileged social space – higher education. In its simplest sense, positive marginality describes how some people respond when the truth is used as a weapon against them (you are Black, you are poor, you are not American, you are a woman) by infusing this truth with negative stereotypes and in doing so, presenting the target with an alternate meaning for their existence – a constructed meaning that is supposed to be taken as true. With positive marginality, members of stigmatized groups can turn such personal pain into power by, instead of absorbing the constructed truth, reframing the labels and in so doing, regain self and group identity. In this data we see that positive marginality is possible: participants can and have identified that value inherent in being a member of their group, are aware of the influence of social structure in determining their reality, and

have located their role in working for a different future for themselves, and in some cases, for members of the larger community.

In conclusion, consider this question: Are these students choosing the margin or are they being forced to the margin? One might argue that the need for having a space where one can be comfortable with one's cultural identity is itself a function of marginalization. As bell hooks (1990) contends, there is a difference between the marginality one chooses as a site of resistance and the marginality that is imposed by oppressive structures. Through positive marginality, the students have located spaces that function for them as sites of resilience and resistance. While we celebrate their creativity, we need to be critical of the experiences of alienation and exclusion that led them there in the first place. This requires that institutions take more seriously their responsibility to educate all students. In doing so, educators will devise means whereby increasingly fewer students will feel the need to devise means of neutralizing the effects of their marginality. Positive marginality, as described here is a response – a choice born of necessity – but not a prescription. Perhaps, as has been done in medicine for diseases like poliomyelitis, we can render social marginalization in schools an obscure phenomenon, and hence, eliminate the need for inoculation.

## IV

### Portraits

*Their personal stories are self-conscious testimonies-- what they have wanted to tell—about themselves as victims and as survivors who exist on the margins of American culture*

*Scott, 1991; p.7*

Life story interviews were conducted with four focus group participants: two women were selected from each college, with homes of origin in Trinidad, Dominica, St. Vincent, and Haiti. Their selection was based on their ability to portray diversity in cultural influences, life experience, social class and family roles. In some cases, women were also selected because in the focus groups they articulated a perspective that was distinct -- either because it was contrary to the group norm or because it typified the group's orientation. The portraits presented in this section are based on two of the life story interviews.

Each interview began with the question: "As a girl growing up, did you think a lot about what your life would be like when you grew up?" The interview progressed from that point with additional questions either from the prepared interview guide or as required to elicit clarification and details. Each portrait begins with an introduction to the interviewee, in which an overview of her life is presented, highlighting the major themes in her narrative. Then, her story is told using these themes as an organizing structure but with an effort to preserve as much of her narrative style, as possible.

## Margo

*“You have to have guts like a calabash to get through high school.” Margo made this declaration when a focus group discussion turned to how definitions of beauty, influenced by European standards, poisoned the verbal barbs that school children hurled on each other as they grew up in the Caribbean. Guts like a calabash? A calabash is a natural sphere fashioned from a dried, hardened gourd. The orb-like form of the calabash can be maintained and used to make musical instruments or it can be halved and used as a decorative bowl. A well-preserved calabash has a surface that is hard and smooth but before it can get to that stage the green calabash (a.k.a. gourdie) that is picked from the tree has to be cleaned of its “guts” or fleshy, seedy insides. Guts like a calabash. The aphorism captured perfectly the impervious, thick-skinned resilience that enables girls to pass through puberty into young adulthood, retaining some belief in their attributes. Courage, confidence, temerity, guts – they needed a lot of it.*

*This proverb attracted my attention to Margo but it turned out she had other commanding characteristics. Her voice was strong and she had presence. The focus group in which she participated was made up of women who were older than the traditional aged college student. In these women’s discussion of life experiences outside of college, the usual litany of academic woes was infused with discussions of their relationships with men, employment and parenting. For example, when the women were discussing the various means they employed to meet their financial obligations, including tuition payments, Margo revealed that she and her daughters were on public assistance and had lived in a shelter for a while after she fled from domestic violence. But “out of every bad comes good”, she declared. Her misfortune had turned into an opportunity,*

*since the nuns from the shelter now provided her and her daughter with a scholarship that paid half of their tuition each semester.*

*I selected Margo for an in-person interview because she portrayed an understated strength. She did not dominate the group; however, when she did speak she did so with quiet authority and insight. In addition, her experience as an abused single mother on US public assistance who had lived in a shelter was an important, often untold piece of the immigrant story. Caribbean immigrants don't often admit to being on public assistance; victims of domestic abuse hardly announce themselves as such. Yet, despite that history she was one semester away from graduation, with a daughter also enrolled in college and two others doing well in high school.*

*At the time of the interview, Margo was a 39 year-old student at Medgar Evers College, enrolled in the CUNY BA Program and majoring in Human Services. She was difficult to reach at home but she always returned my calls and was very thorough about following up and confirming, once we had agreed on a time and place. After several attempts to schedule, we were able to arrange the interview for the same day when she was coming to the Graduate Center for her audit at the CUNY BA office.*

*When she walked into the office she was dressed casually in khaki capris, a plaid short-sleeved shirt over a white tank top, and sandals. Her hair was cut to a short, curly cap.*

*I asked her how the audit had gone and she told me she had 18 credits left to complete her degree. She was planning to take 6 classes in the fall so she could graduate and get some work experience in her field. She had stopped by the admissions office and picked up the booklet on CUNY masters programs but she hadn't had a chance to look at*

*it yet. We talked about the McNair program and the CUNY Pipeline programs, and how they might benefit her. We also talked about the timeline for getting applications in and all that was involved. I told her I thought she should consider going straight for the Ph.D., since she would have a better chance of getting funding than if she was in a masters degree program. She asked me how old I was and if I had any kids. She also asked me a lot of questions about the difference between a masters degree and a Ph.D. and we talked for a while about program requirements, juggling family and other social obligations and other aspects of graduate school life.*

*We had been chatting for more than half an hour when the conversation started to go into the direction I thought I'd want to start recording. I was concerned about interrupting our flow but I was also mindful of the time passing. So I said, so we should get started, or something like that and asked her the initial question I had down: "As a girl growing up, did you think a lot about what your life would be like when you grew up?" She laughed and responded:*

MARGO: I always wanted to have a happy life, like the fairy-tale life you read about. You meet Prince Charming, you get a nice husband, and you have kids and stuff like that. Education was always a big factor in my life but I grew up with a mother, a crippled father, and two siblings in a place in Trinidad called Behind the Bridge.

TRACY: Literally called Behind the Bridge?

MARGO: Literally we call it Behind the Bridge.

TRACY: Okay.

MARGO: And Behind the Bridge identified in those days with bad johns, with drug pushers, whatever. Up to this day if anybody succeeded from coming from Behind

the bridge, you know, whether a doctor or lawyer, that is good because most of the people from Behind the Bridge ended up on the street, teen-age pregnancies, domestic violence, drug abuses and stuff like that. But although I grew up Behind the Bridge I always consider myself above from the rest because I never really hung out with a crowd from Behind the Bridge. I would say good morning, good evening to whoever, you know, be respectful, but my friends were always on the outside. Lived in the bourgeoisie areas or whatever. So I grew up with my mother and my father. He was crippled. He was crippled for nine years. He had a stroke. And, you know, we took care of him the best we could until he expired.

My mother, she never had a high school education and she was not a disciplinarian so she never could really give me any advice or help me when it came to my academics. Everything was up to me. And growing up with no kind of direction in my life -- I didn't have a mentor, I didn't have anybody to talk to. In fact, my mother wasn't even one of the women who, you could say would sit down and tell you about your period and stuff like that. Whatever I learned was from friends in the street or from reading because I liked to read because reading opened the doors for me to experience different cultures and different worlds so I also had a fond love of reading. When I was in school I did pretty well in my classes but unfortunately, playing hooky and hanging out with the wrong crowd when it was time for me to sit the GCE & CXC, I didn't go and take any exam. So it looked as if I went to school for five years and I just threw five years down the drain because I didn't do the GCE or CXC. So those dreams I had of finding Prince Charming and stuff like that, they kind of disappeared somewhere along the line

because life was hard. I didn't have a good high school education although I could read and write.

*Not having a high school certificate, in Trinidad Margo worked at a series of odd jobs – as a cook, store clerk, and as a cleaner to make money so she could contribute her share to the household expenses. At night, she would hang out at clubs and, during the time she described as the “disco era” she got pregnant and gave birth to her first daughter, when she was eighteen years old.*

MARGO: So with my daughter now, the father never acknowledged her as his child. Up to this day she does not know her father. He has never supported her and my daughter was left in my mother's care many a time so I could work to bring home the bacon. I did a couple of trips to Venezuela because in those days a lot of trafficking was going on where you go back and forth. And if you can't get a visa to come to the States, you go to like Curacao or Puerto Rico, the small islands and you take things home to sell. And I was doing my last job at a place called Jo Jo's Gyro's, I remember.

So I was working there with these Syrian people. I had worked for them for a year and coming to the end of the year when they're supposed to give me an increase in salary or I'm supposed to have a holiday or whatever, they decided to fire me. And they didn't have good grounds to fire me so I took it to the Labor Department in Trinidad and I won the case. I won the settlement with some moneys and then from there I said, you know what? I always hear people talk about America, let me try and see if I can get a visa to come to America. So I applied for a visa to come to America. But visas were still hard to get. You have to show criteria—this that and the other before you could get one. So the

woman gave me the visa to come to America but when you get a visa you have to leave the country within a certain period of time from the day you get the visa. So now, here I had a visa in my hand-- It wasn't even a multiple indefinite. It was good for six months or something like that. So here I had this visa in my hand but I didn't have the funds to travel. [Both laugh].

But I remembered I had an uncle who used to come down because he lived in America for years. Both of us were on a joint bank account, but I didn't need his signature to take out funds from the bank. So when I realized this was something I could do-- I'll go and take the money from the bank account, come to America on a vacation. It takes some years before he comes home and by that time I [will have] come back home with some money I'll be able to put it back in the account and he wouldn't know anything. So that is what I did. I went and took out the money. All I had was like \$250 in spending money to come to America and I came to America.

*When I interviewed Margo, she had been in the US for about fifteen years-- although she had left Trinidad intending to spend about two weeks away. As Margo put it, in her 15 years of living in the US, she had lived in 14 different places. Much of her story was about these moves—what precipitated the move, and what led to the next one. When I realized she was more or less using the moves as the framework for one big story, I tried a couple of times to redirect her. If I asked for clarification or more detail on a point she was making, she would give it to me and get right back on track. If I tried to link some aspect of what she was telling me to an insight I thought I was having about her school aspirations, she would answer/acknowledge me, and then get right back on*

*track. After a while, I decided to let her get out what she had to say. I thought to myself that if we had time, then I'd ask some questions, if necessary.*

*Initially, she had not wanted to stay with her relatives, because although her uncle could afford to do so, he had not been helpful to the family back in Trinidad. She had a friend who had some friends who lived in Far Rockaway, NY and he arranged for Margo to stay with that family. When she got here, however, the family was living in cramped quarters and she was not comfortable there. She went to visit her uncle and his family in Brooklyn, and after a while, she decided to move to live with them.*

MARGO: You could say the people in my family are really like living dead. They don't really help you because for the length of time they'd been in the States they could have filed for my mother because you have to have a family member coming here and opening the way for others. And they never really did much for us. Whenever my Uncle would come to Trinidad-- you know somebody coming from the cold [would usually] bring this, bring that for me. He would just walk with a suitcase with just a few shirts and so on. My family background is Chinese and they're very frugal people. My uncle is a very cheap man. So that's why I was kind of reluctant to go and stay by them. But when I came and realized the situation I was in with this guy and the kids, I said let me just go stay by my uncle. So I stayed there in his house. His wife was Black American and they had two children. My cousin and I sometimes would be at war with each other. So we used to bait each other with the accent thing, right? But after staying out there on Flatbush. It's right there on Ocean Avenue and Church Avenue and going around to the stores and stuff I realized that my \$250 was finishing and I needed to get a job to get some money. So my uncle told me, he said, don't worry, Margo, you don't have to pay

for any rent or anything here. Know what I mean? Just as long as you're here with us you can live for free.

But my aunt, she had different ideas. You know, you've been in somebody's house and after a while they start showing you bad face. But I stayed there and I got a job right on Flatbush Avenue in a little dress store working for, I can't remember how much, like \$150 or whatever a week. Long hours, from 9 to 6, Monday to Friday. And after staying there I realized I wanted to stay [in the US] longer to work and make some money. So I said, you know what? I better go and look for, see if I could get a room to rent, you know, whatever. So I started asking around the vicinity and I got an apartment right, one block over from where my uncle was at 475 Ocean. I started to live on East 21<sup>st</sup> Street.

So I lived there. I eventually ended up leaving the job on Church Avenue and I asked around the area. There used to be a Korean restaurant right there by the D train. It's not there anymore. And I went in there and I asked them for work. I was the only black woman working there as a waitress with them. But these people they, without warning, they let you go. I remember one time it was in wintertime, business was very slow. And they said, you know, we can no longer keep you. So with that now I was without a job. No kind of network support. I had my rent to pay. I couldn't go back to my-- I didn't want to go back, lose face and go back by my uncle's house and live.

*At this point, Margo was in a dilemma similar to what she had faced in Trinidad when she was unfairly dismissed from her job. However, she was now in the US on a visitor's visa, and had no legal status as an employee. The option of pursuing legal*

*recourse was not open to her. If she wanted to stay in America, she had to accept this injustice and find another way of surviving.*

MARGO: So there was a customer who used to come in the restaurant and when I explained my plight to him he said, well, you know what, you can move in with me. Because it was either I stayed in the basement, owing the landlord rent, or slept with the landlord because he was an old man, he was very, he was a fresh old man. It's either this or that, Okay?

So I picked up myself and I moved in with this gentleman from the Cayman Islands, Bill. He was a man—those days I was like 25, 26. I was a young girl coming from the island, had my freedom. Never really shackled up with no big-- with no old person, you know what I mean? Come and go as I please in my mother's house. But I went from Far Rockaway to Ocean Avenue, to East 21<sup>st</sup> Street, and then to East 16<sup>th</sup> Street, out there by Bobby's [Dept Store]. So I started to live there with this um, with this gentleman and--

TRACY: Was this a relationship?

MARGO: It was a relationship. It was a relationship we were in. But he was more in love and I wasn't in love because my heart was elsewhere. I still had my boyfriend back on the island so my heart was elsewhere, but he was a good person to me. Up to now, up to this day we still remain platonic friends and I stayed with him but he was very controlling. He wasn't abusive but he was controlling and you know, he wanted to know where I am and I was always kind of scared. When he'd go to work and I would go out I was always looking over my shoulder to see if he's following me and stuff like that. So I stayed there with him for awhile. I used to write to my boyfriend back

home and tell him, you know, x, y and z, what's happening. And this man, he either found the letters that I used to write or found the replies. So he knew that my head wasn't screwed on too tight in the relationship we had. And that sort of brought friction in our relationship. Because at that point in time I knew about the green card marriages and asked him if he would do it for me and at one point in time he said that he would do it for me. He was married but separated. He wasn't divorced. So all this red tape you had to go through before, before that could have actually happened. So I stayed there for awhile and things started becoming bad between us. Not in an abusive way or whatever but there was like a void. And like when he come from work I would be in the kitchen talking to my friend and then he would be in the bedroom. And then we started sleeping in separate rooms and it's like, to me, I can't take it no more. I gotta get out, I gotta get my own place or whatever. So with that now, I said I have to move again. [Laugh] So I picked up myself. I had a girlfriend that lived in the Bronx and I called her. And she said it's okay, you can come and stay by me for awhile.

*While staying with her girlfriend, Margo found a job back in Brooklyn.*

*Eventually, she left the Bronx to live in a tiny, windowless room in a boarding house near her job, for which she paid \$50 a week. After a while, she moved into a three-bedroom house, which she shared with her friend, Vashti, and another woman. She paid about \$80 a week, plus utilities.*

MARGO: So it was just us three girls living in there. So we stayed in that apartment there for a long while and during that period of time that is when I met my, my baby daddy.

[laughter]

MARGO: Now my baby daddy, he is Grenadian. High color Grenadian from a very well-to-do family back in Grenada. He was a foreign student when I met him. He was younger than me by six years and he didn't have any legal status. He paid out of his pocket, \$50,000 a semester but he worked. But he's a very secretive person because up to this day I still don't know if he has his green card, or how he got his green card. But he came from a family where education was a number one in their life. And his family married people with Ph.D. and MBA and stuff like that. They were well-to-do and he was the second to last boy in the family, right? So now here I am, the older woman, looking as if I'm robbing the cradle. I don't have no status, I don't have that educational background that the family's gonna look for. And worse things worse I became pregnant with the first grandchild so how the family gonna look at that, right?

*Andrew, who Margo jokingly described as her "baby daddy", was in college when she met him. He was light-skinned and from a family that valued education and did not welcome her into the family. She was uneducated, was six years older than their son, and bore them their first grandchild illegitimately. She describes herself as being "so stupid in love" with him. He kept her at arms length and she later discovered he had been fooling around with other women. She was conscious of the way the family looked down on her but she was a key player in Andrew's education. She took care of all administrative matters, helped him with his research and would drop off completed assignments for him because he was working in Barclays Bank while going to school. In those days with him, it occurred to her she could go to college also: "What horse does reach, jackass does reach". However, it was going to be some time before she could*

*attain that goal. First, she had to move again because she needed more room for herself and the baby.*

MARGO: So, during the pregnancy I used to work in this place [a beauty supplies store] on Bedford Avenue. I used to work with some Jewish people. I used to be receptionist, cashier, clean the store, but it was a 9-5 job. And it was \$150 a week and, besides doing what you're supposed to do, there were extra duties you had to do. Run and carry the boss' clothing to the laundry, cleaning in front of the store before he gets a ticket, you know, doing a bit of everything. But it was still a job and I held onto it. So, during that time, that place was right by the Sanitation Department on Bedford. I started asking around the men because they were the ones who would come in the store. And one of these guys, this Grenadian guy, he had a two bedroom apartment in Rockaway Parkway for rent. It was something like \$600 or \$675. So between Vashti and I we came up with the money, said good-bye to Cynthia and then we were on the road again.

*One irony of Margo's story is that this child that she gave birth to while she was in an unfulfilling relationship, rejected by her boyfriend's family and barely able to make ends meet, provided her with a way towards visibility in the U.S. Having named her daughter after herself, Margo was able to use the child's social security number to register for and pass the GED. She was living with Andrew for a while but he made it clear he preferred to live by himself. So she moved to a one-bedroom apartment in a building where she did some maintenance work, in return for which, the owner deducted \$60 from her monthly rent. Despite her efforts to move on with her life, however, Andrew "was still coming back bothering me."*

MARGO: And it was during that time when he came back that he impregnated me again with the second child. But before the second one, after I had the first one I became pregnant. And I had an abortion. But after he knocked me up with the second one and gave me money to go have an abortion again, I refused to have an abortion. He kept saying it was economic suicide, this, that and the other. I said I'm not gonna have an abortion again. I'm gonna have these two children. It's two children, one father, but I'm just gonna tie my tubes. And so said, so done. So now I was having this second baby for him and my hormones were raging. I was cross because the first one was a love child but the second child, you could forget it. Everything is just passed into the womb, which is how she came out. She was a very, colicky, crying baby. Up to this day she's still a cry baby. But you know, she's the last child. I call her Kiara Destiny, because destiny is your fate. And Kiara, that word means to change or make a difference. So that's why I call her Kiara Destiny.

So here I was living on Newport Street and he came around a couple of times but we didn't have a good relationship. I was on welfare with one child already and there he was making it in college. I myself wasn't on the budget in welfare because I didn't have legal status. I just had two American-born children for me with no legal status. So here I was putting another child on the case. Welfare, they give you, it's \$234 for two children. So that is \$468 a month I would get and \$212 in food stamps. So with that \$468 and whatever I got from him although by right he's their father, he's supposed to be supporting me, you know what I mean? I tried to make ends meet. I had to pay my rent and then send money for my big daughter back home and my mother but I'm a very

contented person. I think I got that from my mother. And I'm a very economical and thrifty person. What little I had, I made do.

*This was another theme of Margo's life story. Her idea of making do was really to accomplish the amazing. With her earnings and social service benefits, she supported herself and children, often helping out the neighbors and other family members. Twice, she had relatives who were in crises move in to live with her. She had very little for herself but always seemed to be giving to others. Fortunately, the network gave back to her.*

*Having resolved to "be a strong woman" Margo finally left Andrew behind her. Through her social services benefits she was able to secure daycare for the children with an African American housemother they called Grandma. She got a job at the Keyfood Supermarket, which was close to the hospital where she volunteered as a nurses' aid. Margo exchanged information with the regular customers about community services, immigrant rights and INS requirements. Margo, who was always reading the papers and notice boards, was a regular source of information about available classes for typing, GED, nurses' aids, and similar offerings. Eventually, she got her permanent resident status through this network: A customer, Carol, introduced her to an African American who, for \$5,000, was willing to marry her so she could become a legal U.S. resident. Ten years after coming to the U.S., Margo got married to an American citizen and was now eligible for an alien registration card (greencard). The very afternoon after the ceremony, Margo went to change her name and to replace her passport, which had expired.*

TRACY: Wait, wait. Let's go back to the wedding day now. How was that? Did you take pictures?

MARGO: Of course I had to take pictures. For the first time in my life I put on some false nails. I bought two little cheap rings by the Korean store. Bought a little white dress and I had my uncle as the witness and the same girl, Carol.

*One year after getting married, Margo, her husband, and the girls went to Federal Plaza to be interviewed. She was granted residency with a temporary status and about two years later she was randomly selected to be interviewed again before the temporary status could be removed. By this time, her husband had been paid and he had moved to Virginia. She found him just in time for him to accompany her for the interview. Her efforts paid off and she was granted permanent resident status.*

TRACY: So did you celebrate when you got it?

MARGO: Yes. I said God is good. There is a higher power. So with that now, I know I'm a green card holder but that still isn't everything. I still only have the green card now. It's just the freedom to go and live in America. You still have to go to school. You still gotta do this that and the other. But already I had the GED under my belt. So that was just a stepping stone for me to get into college. Because I learned all about the college experience from the children's father so I know I gotta do something with my life.

*Having made that declaration, Margo went ahead and enrolled in Medgar Evers College, CUNY. However, the way she related that experience of starting college is very unremarkable. In contrast, she recounted in full detail all the steps she took and the various snags she encountered in making her marriage look legitimate to the INS. I was interested in her first impressions of college life and the way she processed and integrated her student identity into her evolving sense of self. However, she did not emphasize these perspectives in the narrative that she was presenting. At that point in her life, starting college was a given. It was much later in her story that Margo revealed how the insight she gained from her college experience and the courses she took, enabled her to make a major turning point in her life.*

*For the time being, CUNY was to play a role of a different type of significance in Margo's life. There was a program whereby immigrant CUNY students were offered assistance in applying for U.S. citizenship. The services included supplying applicants with the forms, photographs, and test booklet, and guidance through the application process. Margo was one of the last students to take advantage of this service before it was no longer available. She knew the deadline was approaching and all her documents were not in order but she took her chance.*

MARGO: It was like a whole headache again, all over again. But you know what? On a wing and a prayer, if I'm to get it, I'm going to get it. I'm just gonna send in what I have --you know, my taxes, whatever, whatever and just send it in. And I sent it in and God was good. Because on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July or whatever. Just before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July—just before that period when they elected to do away with that citizenship thing. They tell me,

you know, I can become a U.S. citizen. I got through with the paperwork. So I say God is good ... So like, when I look back at my life I was like, damn, Lord, I've come a long way. You know, just the other day it seemed like I didn't have this, that and the other. But now I'm making some kind of progress. So now I had the citizenship.

*In the interim, Margo's daughter, Toni, had come to the U.S. when she was 16 years old, leaving a young child of her own back in Trinidad. As Margo put it, "it was like history repeating itself". They did not have the mother-daughter bond that Margo now shared with her two younger daughters. Toni was then 21 years old and overweight. Margo was very bothered by Toni's weight and also because Toni promptly adopted "American ways", like smoking, buying take-out food every day, and talking to her in an aggressive/defensive manner. Margo enrolled Toni in GED classes, which she passed and then enrolled in college. At the time of the interview, Toni was attending LIU and Margo was trying to get her to matriculate in a CUNY college so she could enroll in the CUNY BA program. She had also initiated Toni's application for U.S. citizenship. Margo complained that Toni was a smart but "indolent girl". She was not assertive, and Margo had to push her to go after opportunities. At the time of the interview, keeping her oldest daughter on course was Margo's greatest concern. The other two daughters were a source of pride.*

MARGO: They're not stupid. I was so surprised one day when I took them to an alcohol and substance abuse class with me. I had a class and I was registering them for the Fresh Air Fund on the same day, trying to kill two birds with one stone. I took them to my class and the teacher told them to write down why people shouldn't do drugs. And

those children made me so proud, you understand? When the teacher told them to stand and read out why children shouldn't do drugs they knew more about that than people who were sitting down in the class. And then the teacher said, brainstorm and write down other alternatives people could use. And the things those children wrote, I was like, damn, I didn't know that you know so much. Well, the big one, she goes to Phillippa Schuyler, that's the school for the gifted. So you know, they give them these lectures about drug awareness and stuff like that. But the little one, she's good too and she's much more sharp and [snaps her fingers] you know, sassy. They wrote a lot. I was like, damn, see how you're aware? But it's just the big one. My heart goes out to her. After you make your children, there's [only] so much you can do.

*Margo's storytelling reached a crescendo with her telling of her relationship with Mario. He was a tall, good-looking Trinidadian who loved her, loved her children, and they moved in together. He was smart, a conservative, sharp dresser, made good money as a printer and was very savvy about finding his way in corporate America. He described himself as a chameleon, able to blend in with any group or setting. However, he also gambled, drank and smoke, and was prone to extreme anger and violence. Her life with him was financially unstable and fraught with emotional and physical abuse. He had difficulty holding a regular job but would always get another one within a few days. He also used his printing skills to do freelance jobs and enabled Margo to make extra money selling unauthorized copies of textbooks at school. He was jealous and possessive and never trusted her. She wanted to leave him but felt trapped: She was a full-time student and the apartment they lived in was leased in his name. Eventually, Mario started to miss the rent payments and they were evicted. Margo took that opportunity to move*

*into a shelter with her girls. After six months in the shelter, during which time she still continued her classes at Medgar Evers College, Margo and her girls moved into rent stabilized public housing.*

MARGO: ... you can stay there for years and you could elevate yourself and move out of the projects. And fortunately, I was lucky to pick a good project. I picked one by Starrett City. Because, you know, when I look up there-- I don't know if I'll ever make it to suburbia-- but I see the trees, I see the sun, I see the moon in the night shining through my window. I see the squirrels, the birds, I'm in contact with nature. There's a lot of space for the children to play, you know? I'm not the kind of parent--I love to give children their freedom so let them explore and they go downstairs and they play and you know, they mingle and stuff like that. But when it comes to school work I'm happy to say that they are motivated kids and I don't have to help them with their school work. I have no problems with them with reading, writing, math, nothing at all. They are 'A' students. They're doing really good. So with that now, we moved down there but I still had this curse in my life. I don't know why I kept taking him back, Tracy.

*Along the way, while Margo was telling me about life with Mario, she would interject about how her emerging consciousness, through the classes she was taking in Psychology and Social Work, led her to question why she was with him. She said she understood why he never trusted her or the other women he was with: his mother had abandoned him when he was three months old and he never saw her again until he was 18 years old. He never developed a good relationship with her. He had experienced violence and abuse in foster care. These insights allowed her to rationalize his behavior.*

*As she took classes in substance abuse she would explain to him what he was experiencing and ask her self why she could never reach him. However, she also saw how her continued involvement with him was diminishing her efforts to get ahead and her credibility with her daughters.*

MARGO: I would still see him sometimes, but you know what? You know, sometimes you're with somebody. You know they have faults but you're in denial. You want them to change and you know the person is a good person but it's just that they have to want to make that conscious effort. But I also realize that when two people are not on the same, same wavelength, although they say opposites attract, it's hard because if two people are smoking weed and hitting the bottle, they're happy together. You look at them you see them happy. If two people [are] praising the Lord together, they're happy. But when you do one thing and I do another thing, indirectly, whatever we do affects each other. And I'm not a smoker, a drinker. And he had all these bad vices, you know what I mean? They would affect me, it would affect my studies and stuff. When I look back, I'm like, damn, how did I make it through with, you know what I mean? Because sometimes it was really hard. With all the stress I went through with him.

But I still stayed in school; I was tenacious to the end. Out of every bad, as I say, comes good again because I was able to get into the PJ's [the projects]. And even when I got into the PJ's I still brought him back in my life because here I was telling him, you know what? Babes, we can be in the PJ's. Your name is not on the lease. So with your little thing we can save because we always talked about having a house and a car, you know what I mean? But, that was just me. My children probably wondered why I kept taking him back.

*She eventually got out of the relationship because she knew she could be killed in one of his violent rages. There was a particularly harrowing incident, which ended up with the police being involved. She saw where everything she had struggled to achieve was being threatened. Even so, she felt “a little guilty” about how things ended up for him.*

MARGO: One day he tried to-- like he would always do crazy shit. One day I had a black eye and you know, a knock here. And when he put you to sit down he would close the door, move the phone and he would just sit down and he would preach to you all day. And this is a man, he had a demonic side to him but he knew the Bible. So he was like fork in one hand and bible in the other.

TRACY: [laughing] Okay. So he literally preached.

MARGO: Yeah. He would preach and stuff like that. And it's like, the slightest-- Like I told you, I wouldn't really argue with him but it's just something sarcastic I would say to hit him below the belt and he would get so enraged. And one Sunday he was talking about if I love him. I said no, I don't love you. Because many times I wanted to get out of the relationship. I used to say I'm not bound to you with marriage, no children, so, you know what I mean, you're free to go wherever you want to go. And he got so enraged. Tried to bite off my nose. He took up a hammer to kill me. He'd break up and mash up everything in the house. I would escape and run over to the neighbor house and lock the door. So it was—the distance between the neighbor's door and our door—because the corridor was narrow—was from here to here. It's like I'm holding on, I'm pushing my weight, so he wouldn't come outside. And I'm knocking on my neighbor

door for her to open up for me to run in there. And then we called the cops and there was a whole thing where he was incarcerated and with him being incarcerated he lost his job, which I felt guilty about.

TRACY: He should keep his hands to himself.

MARGO: Yes. Because he had a prior history of a baby mother filing an order of protection. I never wanted to walk that channel and get involved with the law and the court. And then when this incident came and happened, um, it put me in the eyes of the housing assistance. They wanted to know, why is this Mario F \_\_\_\_ there? He's not on the lease, why is he there? Do I need to move to another shelter again? I'm like, you know what I mean? I really gotta get a grip on this thing because I am muddying my own waters, right?

*They eventually made a clean break and moved on to become platonic friends. Mario moved in with his new girlfriend who was pregnant with his fourth child (the other three were by three different women). Margo last saw him in November 2001. They hugged and he gave her some money for the children's Thanksgiving holiday. They talked on the phone and in March, 2002, they arranged for him to come by and do her taxes, as he always did, and for him to meet her new boyfriend. He never showed up and she chalked it up to him being his usual unreliable self.*

*A few weeks later a mutual friend called Margo to tell her she had read of a Mario F \_\_\_\_ who had been stabbed and lay on his bed, bleeding to death. "It was my Mario!" she told me. Apparently his girlfriend, who had also been slashed, had stabbed him. The story just hung there for a long while.*

*Social Services figured very prominently in Margo's story. She read all the literature she could get and asked questions. In this way she was able to secure baby-sitting for her daughters, WIC and food stamps, and monthly support for them. After being in the shelter she got subsidized housing in the "PJ's" (projects). She chose this over Section 8, which is only for a limited time. In the projects, she can live there as long as she needs to, while she completes her education and saves enough money to move to the suburbs with her two younger girls (ages 12 and 9). College Work-study was the main source of funding for her education. In addition, after leaving the shelter, she and Toni received yearly scholarships from the Switzer Foundation, through the Catholic Sisters who ran the shelter, Providence House. As she told her story, their time in the shelter was a good experience for Margo and her girls. Although they were homeless, they were a very positive influence on the residents and gained the approval of the nuns.*

MARGO: They loved the children because my children, they'll be brats when they're ready but they're well mannered and they're very intelligent. I tell you that much. I always tell them, you know, I can't give you the material things and the name brand stuff but if there is one thing I can give you is the education. So I've always exposed them to books and as poor as I am I always expose them to the arts. I take them to the museums. Different art shows and Broadway shows and stuff like that. I clip coupons like crazy. They have things in Daily News, sweepstakes I send 10, 15 entries. I get tickets. I go on 2 for 1 programs. A little bit of everything so they're well rounded. And then I have them in the Fresh Air Fund program, which allows them every summer to go to the different states and experience suburban life. Where they just don't stay in the ghetto and think life is just a ghetto. So they're well rounded.

So the nuns and stuff, they really love this and they check for us and we were involved with a lot of things at Providence House. Seeing that I was in college I used to write—they have a newsletter that comes out every month-- I would write, you know, write about myself and how I came there, you know, get involved. Because one of the nuns was, um, she's a principal at St. Joseph College downtown. And then of course I would cook up a storm in that shelter, Girl. When it's my turn to cook, you know, there would be a whole plethora of food like plantain-- all the different dishes, you know what I mean? As compared to the other girls who didn't really like the cooking thing too much. I like the cooking thing and these people had a lot of food. They had like, larders, pantries full of food. Food for us really to cook.

*Margo just could not say enough about the good time they had at Providence House. Unlike many other periods in her life, at that time their basic needs for food and safety were met. Characteristically, she wants to make this possible for other young women in need: If she had enough time and money, Margo said she would buy a house big enough for her to take in young single mothers who are in school. She also wants to help her country, Trinidad, and immigrants from there. She likes to travel and is planning to take a trip to Panama, which is where her current boyfriend is from, and tour South America on her way there. Looking to her professional future, Margo sees her experiences being a guiding influence in the type of work she will do.*

MARGO: When you go out in the field and you see these caseworkers, they treat you like-- they treat you really terrible. So I always said if ever become a caseworker,

you have to have empathy. You have to have this altruistic nature and really want to help people. That's why I always say when I get out there in the field or I get my degree, I'm not even worried about how much money I'm gonna be making because I'm a contented person. I mean, how much shoes, how much clothes, cellphones can one person use? Every fad that comes out, they want to sell you when you don't need them. You know what I mean? How much can you use? After awhile you just become a slave to it. Materialistic. You will never see your way in life. So I'm saying that how—oh, I lost my train of thought. Yeah, when I get out there in the field, you know, since I already walked their shoes I will be more sympathetic to the people out there. Of course there are gonna be some people out there that's gonna be messed up. Because a lot of people think that the system owes them, right? But it's [only] so much the system can do for you and even if you're poor you can still have things in life. You can still accomplish things. You don't have to be stagnated. It's just for you to go out there and use the resources that you have. So much children out there, they live in the projects. They've never been to a museum, to a Broadway show. They don't know what you're talking about. The family never exposed them to these things. So, it's up to you to do the best you could for yourself and for your kids.

*Margo believed that it was up to her and she chose to do her best. Her personal choices were constrained by her illegal status in the US and by some instances of poor judgment. However, going back to the circumstances of her birth – Behind the Bridge – was not an acceptable option for Margo. Margo's story illustrates how important it is for persons to be able to access structural supports in order to achieve their goals. In her*

*case, social services, immigration counseling services at CUNY, Providence House and the Spitzer Foundation supplemented the assistance she got from her family and social network. In many ways this aid was neither adequate nor was it automatic. Nevertheless, she just kept moving forward.*

*There was something about Margo that enabled her to see where she could make choices, and in those small spaces, she chose to effect change for herself, her family, and for many others. What was it about Margo? She described herself as being “tenacious to the end” and she was right. Guts like a calabash – that’s it! Margo had a lot of guts.*

### **Malika**

*Malika was a 24-year-old sociology major at Hunter College when she volunteered to participate in a focus group. She had left Dominica two and a half years ago as an international student (i.e., with a student visa). During the group discussion, Malika challenged the easy way in which the group tended to dichotomize the us/them relationship between students of African ancestry who were Caribbean-born and American-born. Malika maintained that, despite dispersed geographical homes and varying socio-historical experiences, American-born and foreign-born Blacks were no different. As she put it, "We are cut from the same cloth." Although her views were strong and, in this sense, counter to that of the group, she was easy going, laughed a lot, and managed to interject her opinion while maintaining a spirit of camaraderie.*

*The average age of the women in this group was that of the typical college student (Malika was the oldest) and, although their talk focused very closely on their college experiences, the discussion was frank and animated, rich with issues of race and gender. As the group discussion drew to a close, Malika announced she had come to the discussion with something on her mind that she wanted to talk about. Growing up in Dominica, she said, she had learned a lot about the histories and current affairs of Jamaica, Trinidad and the other larger countries in the Caribbean. Now that she was living in the US, she was dismayed at the number of times she met persons from those islands who knew nothing about her country. And worse, they categorized persons from the southeastern Caribbean islands, labeled the Lesser Antilles, as "small island people". Certainly in that small group we were all guilty. We had all, at some point, made such a thoughtless reference and our behavior was really unjustifiable. Malika*

*pointed out it was bad enough that students in the Caribbean had to learn everything about the U.S., and other 'developed' nations. We should make it our business to learn about the other countries in our region. Further, for us to perpetuate this "small island" labeling was divisive as well as derogatory. Considering that to the rest of the world we were all "small", it really made no sense for us to respect or denigrate each other, simply on the basis of the size of our countries of origin.*

*This forward-thinking dynamo was perhaps just less than five feet tall. She had very light brown skin and eyes and wore her copper-colored hair in dreadlocks. Afterwards, when I called to ask her if she would participate in an in-person interview she laughed and agreed to do it, almost as if she had already known I would call. As the interview got underway, I asked Malika if as a girl she had thought a lot about what her life would be like when she grew up. Malika had, just like many other little girls, dreamt a lot about her future. She described these dreams to be like romance novels, where she would meet the right husband, they would marry and have three children and she, most likely a housewife, would be "sweet and accommodating". At the time, that would have been fine for her, but now her dreams had changed.*

TRACY: So what has changed? What's different?

MALIKA: Oh, well. First of all, I had a very American and Euro-centric lens on. So I'm thinking about marrying a certain person, of a certain complexion, with a certain type of hair. Not that I'd necessarily say that, it's just what was in my head, what I was picturing. I didn't feel that my children were gonna be darker than me, you know what I mean? I figured my children were gonna look like my mother and my brothers. And they

would never look different. And also, I thought that there would be a big day in church. I always thought I would get married in a church. I would be catholic and my children would, you know and well, obviously all that was just blown to bits. [Laughter]

TRACY: Well, [laughter] it's not that obvious for me because I don't know.

Where do you spend your Sundays?

MALIKA: Not in church.

TRACY: Okay.

MALIKA: Because you know, my perspective changed when I came to college. A little bit before that. But then it really started evolving. And now I see myself as much more African, much more as a black person. I'm looking forward to having children, whatever complexion. As a matter of fact, I used to feel differently about inter-racial relationships. Now I'm not too enthusiastic about it so if anything, my children are definitely going to be black children. And I'm looking forward to building a family with children who have a strong identity in terms of where they came from, you know what I mean? And those things were just not important before. So if anything, I'm looking towards building a strong black family. And being conscientious about capitalism and inequality and those things which were not even real to me. For me those things were not issues. For me those things were things people used to gripe about, you know? So that's how it's changed.

*These were big changes, some of which had emerged before she left home, while she was in a relationship with someone she described as a "roots man" -- a young man who held strong Pan Africanist views. During this time, Malika read books and*

*discovered her Black identity, which served her well when she moved out of the relatively small, secure social structure of home and into the diverse, yet racially stratified USA. Moving here, she realized her Blackness was not simply an abstract idea but was a major frame for her experience of existence in America.*

MALIKA: A lot of education came into the picture. I started reading and I started seeing the way things really were and I really finally figured out who I was. Because before that I knew I was Dominican and I knew I was from the Caribbean but I really didn't embrace myself as a Black person, as a person of African descent. I didn't acknowledge that as part of my heritage and I finally had to reach a point in my life where I said I'm a Black person. That's it. If I walk into a room where something affects people who are of African descent I'm part of that as well. You know, whereas I never thought of myself like that so when I came here it was like I was like-- I had to. It was really an awakening. I wasn't just a light skinned person, you know, in a society that it's just about color, not really about race as such, you know? I was a Black person in a society where there are two groups, you know. Basically, they're on top, we're on the bottom. And I was on the bottom so I had to... you know?

*Malika's ignited racial identity helped her to maintain her self esteem as she adjusted to life in the US. As she explained it, she had been exposed to racial differences when she was at home. However, these differences were more explicitly intertwined with social class in the Caribbean than they were in the US. Further, the relatively small*

*population of Dominica made it impossible to ignore how color lines corresponded with social class demarcations in that country.*

MALIKA: ... back home, race has a lot to do with it. Obviously, that's a pattern, you know, the whole spectrum of dark to light. It's all about race. But it's not manifested as race because we really don't have that many people of different races. So what we have at home is just a whole bunch of Black people who have taken it upon themselves to create-- not create but to adhere to these really arbitrary categories. So you have light skinned people, brown skinned people, dark skinned people. And a lot of times it correlates to economics. Or class.

TRACY: Right. That's another thing. Because throughout a lot of the Caribbean you have this very rigid class structure that we accept as so normal, right? And you don't feel it or you're not conscious of it until you hear how others see it. And then you're like, oh, yeah, that's true.

MALIKA: That's what I mean.

TRACY: So that's the case in Dominica too, right?

MALIKA: It's ridiculous because Dominica's a small place. So it's like, okay, if you come from a larger island, like you come from Jamaica. I guess you know the few families that are very affluent. But Jamaica's such a large place that I think the people who are the base make up a large, like a large section. But at home, it's so small that you know everybody intimately. So it's really, really, ridiculous. Whereas in Jamaica you may know that on one end of the island the white people are partying in the exclusive place, you know, in Dominica you'll be in the store with those people. You'll be coming

into contact with them because it's a small group of people. It's just that the attitudes are still there. So it's ridiculous because we have all these people in the same boat. Really, I don't think there's much of a difference between people who supposedly don't have anything and the people who are supposed to have so much. I mean, there is a difference but in terms of if you look at it from a worldwide perspective, there really isn't. Probably, with the exception of like, two or three individuals or families in Dominica. We cannot claim to be, you know, any different from one another. So that's why the problem, to me is really, it's annoying. It's really annoying. You know, I just want to tell them, don't you know we're all the same?

*Although she had lost her regard for the color/class structure, I asked Malika to tell me where she and her family fell on the hierarchy in Dominica. She did so, explaining her reluctance to embrace class labels for herself. She also went on to share with me her views on the limited value of aspiring toward a particular class status.*

MALIKA: I was middle class. I guess you could say upper middle class. I mean, I don't know. Just the other day I was talking to a friend of mine and we were talking about this whole class thing and she called me oh, you're upper-middle class, upper class. And I was like, you know what? I've shed those things so much. I'm very cynical about it. But if I have to be objective, I would say that it's upper class or upper-middle class. Upper-middle class to middle class. Somewhere in between that. And for me, it's because of a number of factors. First of all, because of the fact that I come from-- my mother's side of the family used to own a lot of land. They were like part of the

bourgeoisie. And you know, names are a big thing. So my mother's last name is supposedly prestigious although they don't have anything.

TRACY: Right. Right. But they have the legacy.

MALIKA: Yeah. They have the name. So my mother has that. And my mother's also very, very light skinned, my mother's almost white. So like, you know, there's also that. And then, but my father is from the country. My father has worked his way up. If my mother had married somebody else her status would be different. But she's still a Shillingford so-- you know what I mean? And my father did work his way up so it's like that kind of thing. Why I said I know I was middle class, I guess, is because of certain things I took for granted in terms of quality of life. But most of my friends and everybody around me was like me so, you know what I mean?

TRACY: I know. Yeah.

MALIKA: So that's what it was, basically. But, another thing with living at home is that the class thing, it doesn't really mean that financially you are better off. It just means that you worked hard to put certain badges on you. It just means that my parents make sure we travel and they make sure that they have a certain type of house and certain things in the house and that they have vehicles and telephones and televisions and that's what it means. It's not that we have money. And an education, too. I mean, I went to the best schools, all the time I was there.

*Although she grew up in a family in which she benefited from the appropriate "badges", Malika no longer accepted unquestioningly the privilege and status that these credentials afforded her. Her awareness of color and class inequities allowed her to*

*develop a critical consciousness that, again, sustained her when her family's circumstances changed within a year after she left home. She had left home with her tuition prepaid for a year and her parents had set up an account from which she withdrew money for her expenses. In that year, the export market for Dominican bananas reduced drastically, in large part due to pressure from US companies based in Latin-America (Dole, Chiquita) on the WTO to enforce the removal of favored status that Europe, the major market for bananas, granted to African and Caribbean products. Dominica's economy relies on agricultural products, primarily bananas. Production dropped and Malika's father was part of a business that went under. When the international trade dispute about bananas resulted in dire consequences for Dominica, this had a direct impact on Malika and her family.*

*When the dorms closed for renovation that summer, Malika knew she would be unable to return to on-campus housing for the following fall semester. Instead of going home for the summer as she had expected to do, she enrolled in summer school. She went to live with various relatives, many of whom had hosted her for summer vacations when she was living in Dominica. However, now that she was living in the US, she found that their attitudes towards her were much different. One uncle told her she could not continue to live in his house with her hair in dreadlocks. When she told him that cutting her hair was not an option, he responded, "Well, you know what to do." So she moved out. An aunt with whom she had a sister-friend type of relationship told Malika she could accommodate her for no longer than two weeks.*

MALIKA: I really felt like saying, take your two weeks and shove it. I really wanted to say that but I felt like-- I wasn't saying I need to live with you for the rest of my college education. I was saying I don't have a place in the meantime, you know. I am gonna be living somewhere but the building is not ready yet and you say to me I have two weeks. You know I don't have anywhere to go. So I went but I was very hurt about that. And it was an eye opener. Because this aunt, today she still fine with me. I mean, that's like my best friend, quote unquote but she doesn't feel any responsibility toward me at all. Sometimes I spend the weekend with her but I think she's happy, you know, that's how she is and I learned to balance that. I learnt that nobody feels obligated to me no matter how nice they are to me. No matter how much of a sweetheart I think I am, I'm on my own. Me and my parents; and my parents are not here so I'm on my own. And then I moved into the place I'm in now. It's okay but then it's been a year and a half since then and I just really, really would like to be on my own.

*Malika had grown up a lot in the two and a half years since she left home. During her high school years she was "always the baby", small in size and often younger than her schoolmates. She was academically advanced and had finished high school and two years of community college by the time she was seventeen years old; however, emotionally she was "a complete, total child". All her peers had left home after community college to attend universities overseas but Malika's parents were not comfortable with her leaving home that early. Malika stayed at home for five years before leaving when she was twenty-two years old. Her parents had not intended for her to stay home for so long, but Malika had grown comfortable working and hanging out*

*with her boyfriend. Now that she was here, however, she acknowledged that the impression she had of life in the US before she left home was very different from the reality she was experiencing.*

MALIKA: ... I mean, my entire impression of here. You know what? When you come here on vacation and you meet up with family it's a different ball game. Because they know you're leaving. For that eight weeks or six weeks or three weeks or four weeks or whatever, it's much different. Which, to me is reasonable. I mean, because people actually have their lives. But when you come on vacation you don't realize the hustle, you know? Like I was saying that to my mother the other day. I said, Mommy, you just don't know. It's hard up here. And I don't tell my parents half of this because I don't want them to worry. And they have enough on their plates. But sometimes I feel very alone. Just recently, yesterday I was completely thinking about my situation, about school in the fall. What am I gonna do? I've got to get this done. And it's not like I can pick up the phone and call my parents. Not because I don't think they would be-- I mean, I'm their child but I just don't-- I feel like I can't run to anybody with this so that's how it is up here.

I think what it is, is that people are struggling a lot more than you can see when you come up here and things are a lot more expensive. When you come here on vacation and you buy stuff, things that you don't need. You buy clothes and food and whatever, it seems very cheap. But when you come up here to live, it doesn't matter that you can get two blouses for \$10 because that's not the issue. The issue is, can you pay your rent? What do you have to spend on transportation? In the wintertime you have to get a good

coat. Those things. Living in New York is just so expensive. So expensive. I never thought. And I'm doing it all on my own. So anything that comes up I have to take care of it. I just don't want to bother my parents. I mean, when it comes to the big things, tuition and stuff and sometimes if I need-- they'll send it but I don't ask anymore. I used to ask but then I stopped.

*When Malika discussed Dominica's economic situation and how it had affected her family, she mentioned that her mother, who worked as an accountant, told her on the phone recently that if she got a chance to do so she would leave Dominica. At first, this was an idea that Malika found upsetting: people of a certain social standing never leave, no matter how bad things around them get. When she thought about what was at the root of her reaction, she saw just how deeply embedded the rules of social class were, even in the presence of her personal enlightenment and disenchantment with those very rules.*

MALIKA: That's when I realized I was holding onto this-- I really had this little bougie attitude [laughter].

TRACY: Even though your consciousness is raised.

MALIKA: I'm telling you! I said to myself, I don't know. Mommy, You sure you want to be one of those people they talk about, "Oh, she left? She went to New York and her sons are going to need her?" No! But you know what I thought about? I said to myself, I wouldn't mind having her here. I let go of that. I said, forget it. You know, and it's sad because I won't be able to stay and build my country. At the same time I was

thinking, I really wouldn't mind having my family here. Things would be a lot easier. A lot easier.

TRACY: Yeah. Well, it's so funny. Class runs deep, right?

MALIKA: It does. I didn't realize how deep it runs until then.

*Another set of values that ran deeply for Malika were the lessons she learned in her home, which influenced her current ideas about what her own home, and relationship would be like. Malika was the first-born, a girl who grew up in a household with her parents and two younger brothers. She was five years old when the older of the two boys was born, at which point Malika went from being an only child to gradually having more and more responsibility. She said the boys had been around long enough for her to adjust to the idea of having siblings, but the real problem for her was that her mother had very distinct ideas about the roles of girls and boys.*

MALIKA: Well, for some reason she feels a woman has to be superwoman. And it's not like she's opposed to-- She's a professional. My mother's an accountant. She goes out and she works every day. Hard. Just like my father, you know? But she also feels obligated to come home and take care of everything in the house herself. And I'm like, well, if you both go out. I mean, my father, his job is much more demanding. My father's always been in management so his jobs have always been demanding. He travels a lot. He works longer hours and all of that and I understand that. But my mother works very hard as well. And she works full-time. So when she comes home I feel like it should be a little more equitable in the house. But she thinks that as a woman that's that. And if

she felt as if she was under too much pressure in the house, she used to look at me. You know what I mean?

TRACY: Of course. You're the girl. What do you think she had you for?

[Laughter]

MALIKA: I'm thinking, look at your husband. Ask your husband what type of household you all are running. You're married to him, not because I'm a girl. It's like she thought that when she had me she had a little helper. I said no. When you and your husband decide you have a house you've got to-- I'm not saying I can't pitch in. But why should the burden be on two people's shoulders when there are five people in the house? Think about it.

TRACY: You always felt that way? Pretty much?

MALIKA: Yeah. At first I thought it was just because I was lazy. Which I should be honest with you, I don't like to do physical stuff. I mean, not a lot of it. I don't want to be responsible for stuff. I'll do it because I don't like dirty stuff but I don't like that. So, I've always been very intelligent and I've been able to reason things. And I've always had a very deeply ingrained sense of what is fair. Always. Always since I was a little child. And I just look around and see it's not fair. I used to say, "Mommy!" And then, when she'd get mad at me I started getting pissed off. I'm like, I'm rooting for you here. You're mad at me. I'm telling you, talk to your husband. So, anyway, what happened is she would just resist that. She would always tell me, it's because you're lazy, that's what it is. It's excuses. Don't tell me anything about that mumbo jumbo about how it's not fair in the house or whatever. If you chip in both of us could do it. And I'm working, blah, blah, blah. You don't work and blah, blah, blah. You stay home

and you're my child and you should be able to do that because you have a roof over your head, your own room, your t.v., your this, your that. You can pay back a little bit. I'm like, I don't have a problem with that but I also think that it should be balanced between men and women in the house. Because my brothers were behind me and they didn't do anything for themselves. Those boys did not learn to do anything for themselves. And in a way I was just telling her she's not doing them a favor. I would say, listen. You're not doing them a favor because you're raising them this way. People are raising girls their age much different. You honestly think they're gonna find somebody to put up with all this? I don't think so. And apart from that, if push comes to shove and they have to do something on their own-- say they have to go to college, they're gonna be completely useless to themselves, you know? So, that's an issue I had with being first and with being a girl.

*Both her parents were relatively young. Her mother, having had Malika when she was 19 years old, would have been about 43 years old at the time of the interview. I imagined what it had been like for her as a thirty-something mother of a defiant teenage Malika, who constantly challenged her mother's views about women's roles. Undoubtedly, Malika made a tough opponent, asserting her developing sense of self and autonomy. Their seemingly private battles really represented an eruption between traditional gender roles and the current reality of more possibilities for young women. A typical scene involved her mother coming to her room to chide her because her room "looks like the boys' room."*

MALIKA: I'd be like, so? So, why don't you come and say both of us clean our rooms?

TRACY: Right.

MALIKA: You know? My mother, she said because you're a girl. You're a young lady and for a young lady your room should not look like this. So I said, you're telling me as a young lady my room shouldn't look like this. Then I have to go to college, get an education, get a career. When I have a career, I have to keep the house spic and span? If you think that women should be responsible for the house being a certain way, then what are you saying? Are you saying that women should just automatically have more on their plate rather than men? I say that to her all the time. I say, do you think it's a woman's job to always take everything on her back? Is that what you're trying to tell me? You're trying to tell me that my father can just go out and have a job, come home, kick his shoes off, get his food served? Because what? And I'm working just as hard as him outside. What are you saying, that women have to take everything? And she thinks that, she honestly just thinks that women should be able to hold it all together and not complain. You know, she really honestly thinks that. Because my mother is not a particularly maternal or domestic person. I'll tell you, it's not the *[mocking tone]* pride in her house or because she's a mother. She's not like that. She's really a corporate type. I'll tell you, my mother's temperament is very masculine in terms of what you would consider masculine. She's very, you know, go get it. Do it. Do it to the best of your ability. So she wants to go, hold down a job, get ahead, make the most money, come home and her house has to run like it's an army base. That's my mother.

*Malika was expressing a struggle I had heard among many of the younger focus group participants. Their mothers were working outside the homes and making at least an equal financial contribution to the household and were primarily responsible for domestic and childcare matters. These mothers were very much on the cusp between tradition and change but their daughters were able to see more clearly the high cost of persevering with these multiple roles. However, even from that vantage point, participants had mixed views regarding whether they were traditional women or not. I asked Malika if having lived in the US had liberated her from the need to juggle work and domestic responsibilities or if she felt she would eventually embrace the same formula her mother did.*

MALIKA: Hell, no.

TRACY: Okay.

MALIKA: Oh no, no, no, no, no. Completely. I completely reject it. I mean, well, not completely. I think sometimes we say things but our subconscious is very, very strong. It has a big influence on the decisions that we make. So I know in my picture that I have of my future, I think I see myself holding down everything. But I don't, I don't-- It's like I keep trying to tell myself it's not for the same reasons. [Laughter] I really do see an egalitarian type of marriage for me so if I do those things I think I'm expecting that my husband is gonna clean just as much. And I keep telling myself I'll do those things because I enjoy them. If I don't want to, I won't. So I hope that's what it really going to be.

*Malika's response betrayed her ambivalence but she is honest. She knows what she would like to do but she acknowledges how easy it might be for her to slip into the same pattern, despite what she says her reasons are for doing so. The good news is that now she is away from home, her brothers have had to pick up the slack and perform more household chores. She is not sure if this was because her mother finally came to see things Malika's way or if her Mom simply could not manage it all by herself. Either way, Malika's being at school had resulted in a more equitable arrangement at home.*

*Malika was happy with her choice of Hunter College. She had been accepted to attend Fordham (her first choice) and Pace University as well, however, she chose to attend Hunter College because she had learned that Hunter College was among the best places at which to study Sociology and the tuition was cheap.*

MALIKA: ...And then when I checked out the credentials for Hunter I was like, hey, if I want to do sociology I could get it done in a good school for much less. And then my parents were like, okay. It's a good thing I did that because my parents didn't see at the time that they would not have been able to commit to that, you understand? And that would have been very, very detrimental because after the first year I wouldn't have had any support. I really would have had to go back home because we couldn't afford it. So, I guess it was a good choice. It's just that at Hunter, like I said, the bureaucracy. And the fact that it's a public school and with certain things you feel like you get the short end of the stick. That's the only thing. But to be honest with you, coming from the Caribbean, you know resources are tight. Even in the best schools at home things are hard. So when you come up here, even on the low end of the spectrum,

it's okay for you. It's fine for you. I'm telling you. So Hunter is A-okay in my book. It's just that I really do experience some setbacks but I can't say that, oh, you know, I used to go to Harvard [laughter]. I can't say that so it's fine for me.

*I asked Malika what her plans were for her life after Hunter College. She had about two more years before she completed this degree and was not sure exactly what she wanted do afterwards. She listed several career options that she was considering, all of which would require further study but would enable her to be self-employed. She said she had to consider how she would manage if "something happened" and she "had to go back" to Dominica.*

TRACY: Is that a plan? Do you think you might move back home or have you become too cosmopolitan or...

MALIKA: I think I have. It's sad because I'm really struggling with that. Really struggling with that in my head-- on an intellectual level. Because I know what my country needs and I know that I can probably help to provide it. But at the same time, the way I see things now, to go back and live at home, I'd probably be just too disdainful (laughter). Some of the narrow mindedness really gets on my nerves and I should probably be a bigger person and be able to educate people but it's just that sometimes, it's just what it is. It's just annoying. You just can't live with it around you. It just brings you down. It's just something you don't need in your life and that's where I am right now. If I get older and more mature, maybe I will think of going back and trying to provide more alternatives but right now, the way I see it, I can't live at home. I'll

probably go back for a little while or go home for vacation, go see my family, you know, but I can't, I don't think I can live at home.

*They say you can never go home. Part of that idea is that when you leave home, after a while you are no longer the same person who left. Malika said the way she had come to view things was a major deterrent to her returning home after she completed her studies, even though a part of her wished she could be there to contribute to her country's development. Her lens had shifted and so had her sense of place and home.*

*It is also true, however, that home changes while one is away. Dominica's economic crisis was one big change that had occurred in Malika's absence. This development presented a ripple of factors that not only affected her and her family now but also had the potential to limit her choices in the future. On the other hand, Malika was living in the US now; this was a choice she had made because of the opportunities that were available to her here that were not available at home and it was even possible that she may choose never to return to Dominica. I already knew that Malika had a fairly well developed social critique of racial and social class inequities. I wondered what her views would be regarding the unequal distribution of power among countries and the way she, as an immigrant to the US, stood to benefit as long as she aligned herself with the US.*

TRACY: I feel like I can ask you this question in terms of the politics because in the focus group you talked about the changes in the banana industry and how that affected your own family. You know that the U.S. plays a part in that. So, not that I'm

expecting you to do a big complicated, political analysis, but here we are, living in the U.S. and we're benefiting from it. Yet there are certain policies that are really putting the squeeze on the countries that we're from, right?

MALIKA: And you know.

TRACY: I know. So how do you reconcile that?

MALIKA: It's hard. I don't know. It's difficult because I'm really benefiting on a micro level but on a macro level in terms of my country, the U.S. is really responsible for my situation.

TRACY: That's right.

MALIKA: I'm thinking, you know, it's like a cycle. I'm here, thinking I'm benefiting from you-- no. No. No, you're screwing me because you're screwing my family and they can't support me. And you're not letting me work, and you know I can't get anything [*in financial aid*] because I'm not eligible. So, you know, in that sense it's hard. And I think that fuels my anger, when it comes to capitalism and certain things. I'm just deciding that when-- I'm the type of person, -- maybe in certain things, I don't know. If I'm supporting a certain company I look for a certain effort so if I don't know that they don't want to pay Haitian workers 50 cents an hour, trust me, I don't know. If I find that out, within my little self, I'm gonna try my best to avoid supporting that company.

I found out about Disney and the fact that Disney, in terms of manufacturing their products has really been oppressing people in other countries who look like me. For years. And then you have this fake, this little supposedly harmless face, that they show to

America and these people and I'm like, you all don't know the half of it. Disney is a sinister company. And so for me that's one thing. As long as I know.

And another thing, too. In this world you're gonna buy things and don't even know where it comes from. So I probably do. But as long as I know that my money's going to Disney, it's not gonna go there. I'm not gonna give my kids Disney stuff. And I used to love Disney but I realize that to me, which one is more important? Keeping up the facade and enjoying something that I guess has been instilled in me? From the time I was a child I thought it was a great thing. Or really making a stand about the fact that people cannot eat? That's more important. So, I don't care how cute or adorable it is or how much children want it or love it. They love it because Disney has the money to put into the image. And if that stops then that means that at least maybe there'll be some sort of-- I don't know. I don't know that it stops, but at least maybe they'll listen. If you say to them, I'm not spending my money with you because this is just too damn unfair, you understand? So it's like, little things like that. That's what really makes me feel a little better. I don't buy Chiquita bananas. I don't really buy those products. As long as I know I try to avoid it. But sometimes, it's very confusing. Sometimes it's just too much for me.

TRACY: Yeah, I know.

MALIKA: I mean, really. And sometimes I think to myself I don't have to be here. Maybe I made the wrong choice. Because I'm so conscious and whatever. I'm right here. I can leave. I mean, I can leave, but I can't really leave. I don't know, but you understand?

TRACY: Yes.

MALIKA: It's like a real tug of war.

TRACY: Sometimes this awareness, it has a high cost.

MALIKA: It does. It really-- you have to really juggle the costs with the benefits.

TRACY: Yes. Yeah.

MALIKA: Yeah. I'm just starting to figure that out. And I mean it's gonna even increase for me, the cost is going to be even more when I start to be on my own. When I start to have certain things that I need to buy for my children and I have to send them to school, and I have to make a decision as to what I think is best for my children. And to be honest with you, I don't expect to be 100% loyal to the cause. I mean, it would be really good and I want to and I'm intending to be but if you live in this society, you know it's just hard to divorce yourself from some of those things. No matter how conscious you are.

TRACY: Right.

MALIKA: You have to really, literally build a log cabin from your hands.

TRACY: Exactly. Well, that's the thing.

MALIKA: And stay out in the woods. And you still have to get certain things [laughter] you know.

TRACY: And then, even if you went the whole way, which I'm not saying we shouldn't but when you-- like, for example, people who refuse to participate in corporate structure. When you make those decisions to divorce yourself then the flip side of that, you're not there to lend your voice to it.

MALIKA: That's another thing too.

TRACY: So. Yeah, well. (Laughter) Not to bring you down, but you know.

MALIKA: But it's really, the cost of life. Sometimes, you know, you have to. I don't know, maybe I'm young and have a lot of energy, right? The cost-- I'm going to school. I have nothing to lose. But if I get property and maybe I'll be just be one of the biggest capitalists around [laughter]. I hope not. I hope not but it's a conflict. I don't intend to be poor by anybody's standards. I want a certain lifestyle but why the hell does it have to be at the expense of other people? I don't think it has to be at the expense of other people. Because I don't want an extravagant lifestyle. For me, that's not my personality, that's not what motivates me. I'm not materially motivated. I'm just motivated by, you know, a certain sense of um, what is it? Like I'm really, I really, just wanna be comfortable. And I think people are entitled to that. Do you understand what I mean? But I don't have a reason to have six cars in my driveway that I'm not using. Stuff on show. I don't have need for that. I really don't think that there's need for that in this world. But then that's very subjective. I want to live comfortably and I want to sleep at night knowing that people in the Philippines, people in Haiti, people even in my island, they're not suffering because, you know, my child has a certain shirt on his back. You know, somebody was getting paid like 20 cents an hour to make it. To me, that just is not right. That this world has to ask that. I think there's another way to do it. I'm sorry. I really do.

TRACY: Right. And because the thing is we've been talking about it in terms of individual costs and choices that you have to make as an immigrant. Um, there are certain ways that you are viewed by people in your country. So say for example, if you did choose to go make the log cabin in the bush...

MALIKA: Oh, please.

TRACY: ... and work and farm, how would you look to Dominicans?

MALIKA: Oh, please, I wouldn't hear the end of it. My parents...

TRACY: Or even your parents.

MALIKA: [*shocked voice*] Oh, that girl, that little Durant girl, we thought there was so much in her and she thought she was all that and she's so fresh and oh, look what she doing now. That's all they'd say-- oh, you know! And then my friends would say, Malika's gone crazy. That's what they would say, you know? Everything. At home, if you're different, you're crazy. You really literally have problems in the head.

TRACY: Have you heard about Malika? She went crazy.

MALIKA: That's what it is. Honestly. I know. I remember hearing about and knowing certain people that I thought were crazy when I was a child. Now, I realize that they just got a whiff of what was happening outside of Durant.

[Laughter]

TRACY: Right. Right. Right. Right. Right.

MALIKA: That's how I feel. You know what? The way I am right now if I talk to certain people that I used to know they'll think I'm crazy.

TRACY: Well, right. Right.

MALIKA: Including my family.

TRACY: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

MALIKA: That's the price. But you know what? I'm hoping that the way they'll think about me is not as important as what I feel. I know I haven't put it to the test yet. But theoretically I think so because I'm – but then again I'm here and I'm not surrounded

by them and I don't give a shit what they think now. But the moment I go back in their midst I'm hoping that I can maintain my composure and not sell out.

*Malika's story is one of a young woman working out interrelated aspects of her development: ethnic, racial, and class issues are embedded in her experience of gender-role socialization, construction of self-identity, and her emerging social conscience. She is a spirited woman from a relatively small place, a country to which she has ties but is not sure she wants to return. Wherever Malika goes and whatever she decides to do, she will undoubtedly have a huge impact.*

**What is gained from creating portraits? Locating the bigger picture**

In telling, a life story often highlights dilemmas and events. However, a portrait is not about these elements but is about a person in time, place and culture. The bigger picture becomes a portrayal of how each person experiences and interprets her social reality. Hopefully more than a snapshot, each portrait has been designed to capture moments in a life that stand out for being intensely real – in the experience, in the recounting, in the hearing, and in the process of analysis and writing. The portraits yield valuable insight into how the experience of being a female Caribbean immigrant college student may be interpreted, when viewed from each woman's unique and valued perspective.

The portraits offer an opportunity to examine parallels and divergence among the lives of interviewees, focus group participants, and the lives of generations of women with similar legacies. In that, the specifics of these two lives highlight similarities and show differences among Caribbean-born women of color. Further, this connection facilitates critical analysis of the interaction between US culture and contemporary women of color and their histories.

In many ways, the portraits provide a more detailed illustration of the major themes discussed in the preceding chapters. The interviewees, when considered as an embodiment of their culture as well as individuals with particular circumstances, give voice and features to the issues of the group. However, there are some concerns that are more distinct in the portraits than in the focus group data. Certainly relevant to the group, these issues are brought into sharper focus through the details of the lives.

**Social and political forces**

Both women's stories depict the way socio-political forces have significant effects on members of marginalized groups. These stories also show variation in the responses to these forces. Malika raised her voice against these forces because of her conviction that it is important to recognize and name injustices. For her, this is the first step toward personal and political power for the disenfranchised. Margo was no less aware of her social and political positioning than Malika. However, she turned her attention within. Her story featured dogged persistence marked by a strong sense of personal responsibility.

**Economic consequences of globalization for the Caribbean**

Having limited financial resources was a harsh reality for both women. For Margo, this was the circumstance of her birth, which she was determined to overcome. Malika had been born into better circumstances but now that her family was in difficulty, she had to figure out how to provide for herself. Although the details of each story are distinct, together these women portray aspects of the financial difficulties faced by immigrants, in general, and Caribbean immigrants, in particular and explain why the numbers of migrants from these countries continue to grow each year. In contrast to more developed countries, most Caribbean countries face severe financial challenges. In those countries, people who are middle and working class are perched precariously on the tide of their countries' economies. As we see in Malika's case, the decline of the banana industry meant financial decline for her family. The economies of poorer Caribbean countries rely on agricultural products such as sugar and coconut. Better off countries have tourism, bauxite, and in the case of Trinidad, oil and asphalt. Despite these resources, the region consists of economically "developing" or "third world" countries

where large numbers of persons are undereducated and there are insufficient opportunities for employment and non-existent or declining manufacturing industries. This is particularly well illustrated by Margo's situation. Although she was from Trinidad, considered to be the wealthiest country in the region, she had to leave that country for a chance of survival.

### **Choice**

In light of the social, political and economic constraints they face, what does "choice" mean for the marginalized? When it comes to pursuing higher education, the choices are limited. Many Caribbean citizens do not even perceive this to be a realistic option for them. The region's foremost university, The University of the West Indies, has campuses in Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica, making this institution geographically accessible to residents of those countries. However, although the tuition is subsidized, since there is very little financial assistance available the cost of attendance is a real issue for many, whether they live in these countries or on other islands in the region. In addition, there are newer colleges, most with US and UK affiliations, which have recently increased the higher degree offerings. Again, attending these institutions are not options for the very poor.

There are three main groups of persons from the Caribbean who become international students: those who cannot afford to study in their home countries, those who have no universities in their home countries, and those who are seeking educational options other than those offered at home (e.g., an unavailable area of specialization, or training from a more reputable institution, or the opportunity to gain international exposure in the area of interest). For many, choosing to advance themselves by getting

more (or a better) education means they must leave home. They are pulled overseas because of the wider number of choices available there. Once they get there, however, the portraits show the price women pay to avail themselves of these options.

### **Dynamics of the social matrix**

Gender, class, race, and nationality are simultaneously lines of alignment and sources of social stigma. The portraits allow us to see more clearly just how complex these interrelated effects of social identity are.

Gender: Malika valiantly denounced traditional gender roles, while women's roles of childbearing, mothering, cleaning, cooking, friend, lover, and girl Friday provided Margo's route to freedom.

Race/Nationality: Margo's afrocentricity is one of the benefits she gained from attending a college that not only had a predominantly Black student population, but also deliberately promoted African based values as a basis for fostering positive self concepts. Malika's proudly developed Black identity and commitment to African panethnic ideals did not preclude her from leveling a spirited critique of inter-island hierarchy and discrimination against smaller Caribbean islands.

Class: Margo's 15-year travail in the US was, in effect, a demanding but definite path of upward social mobility. No longer living in a Trinidadian ghetto with no possibilities, Margo had attained legal US status and, with her degree, a personal and professional achievement that assured a better life for her and her family. In contrast, over the course of one year Malika slid down the social scale. At the time of the interview she was still coming to terms with the startling repercussions, however, she did not consider herself to be on the pathway to ruin or poverty. Rather, her awareness of the

forces that resulted in her condition, and her personal commitment to the values of a resilient African community, allowed her to identify a better future for herself. Although she clearly did not yet have the details worked out, her narrative evidenced her ability to imagine herself in circumstances that were different from her current reality. In addition, Malika was in the process of working out her personal definition of *success*. In a sense, being deprived of financial security provided her with space to imagine alternative routes to self definition, activism and productivity. Although she did not wish for a life of poverty she was learning that material gain did not define her. For both women, upward mobility was desirable and even important but did not represent their primary motivation.

### **Conclusion**

Roger Housden (2005) encountered Rembrandt's Self-Portrait (1669) by chance while he was in the National Gallery in London escaping the afternoon rain and with about an hour to fill. Housden saw in Rembrandt's arresting gaze a message that evoked a powerful response in him:

It was that he was so fully present to the truth of his condition, so unapologetically who he was, that he summoned something of the same in me. He was hiding nothing and, I felt, was encouraging me to do the same.

(p.9)

The common humanity that Housden saw in Rembrandt's eyes told him as much about the artist/subject as it did about himself. Through viewing Rembrandt, Housden learned to see and accept himself, and to show himself to others.

Although I am a Caribbean woman who has had my own share of personal catastrophes, the course of the life stories sometimes surprised me. I selected these four

women for interviews because I thought they would provide a cohesive but diverse group representative of Caribbean-born women in the US. They exceeded my expectations; each woman told me a story that was full of life in all its forms, and in ways I could not have imagined. At points I have thought, astounded, who are these women? And as a result, I have had to think, who am I?

The answer to this question takes me beyond the background I share with the interviewees. I am a researcher and an educator who has chosen to focus my professional efforts on populations of color, most of whom are Caribbean-born. I have taught women such as the subjects of these portraits. To what extent have I had their circumstances in mind as I delivered lectures and evaluated their work? This study is not the last I will conduct with this theoretical focus. I continue to be fascinated with issues of adjustment among groups and individuals in challenging life transitions. How will the perspective I have gained from this data inform my future studies? As I pursue my own professional and social advancement, how will I better facilitate others in pursuit of these goals?

Perhaps, the least that is to be gained from my viewing and describing these women's lives is that I learn to candidly look my own self in the eye.

## Chapter 4

### Discussion

*“Black women have almost always operated outside of traditional and middle-class white sex roles, thus transcending and “recoloring” their blackness – changing a “negative” into a “positive.” Any attempt to study black women involves the interplay among three intertwined areas in ethnic, racial, and class studies: sex-role socialization, construction of self-identity, and social movements.”*

*Scott, Kesho Yvonne, 1991; p. 7*

This study was conducted based on the assumption that Caribbean women in higher education are socially marginalized, yet resilient. The design was guided by an interest in (i) the intersecting influences of race, gender, social class and nationality, (ii) women’s description of the challenges they experience, (iii) the personal, social and cultural resources they mobilize to facilitate their progress, and (iv) the extent to which this data is consistent with the theoretical framework of positive marginality. This focus acknowledges that while women’s academic challenges may be determined by their membership in social categories of race, gender, social class and nationality, their strategies for academic persistence may be grounded in their ability to recognize strengths in being located at the margin and in their ability to engage those strengths. Hence, the conceptual model, data collection and analysis focused on the interplay between individual agency and social structure, with an interest in demarcating the limiting factors while identifying what enables possibilities, within and despite these limits.

The study objectives have been met, in that the collected data allowed an examination of the issues that guided its design. The findings have been presented under three main organizing themes of *gender negotiation, community/difference*, and

*marginalization/positive marginality*. However, sub-issues of race, nationality, class and personal identity are crosscutting themes, which have been presented and discussed in each section. Across these themes and issues are a number of important ideas that emerge from these findings and connect with ideas in the existing literature. These linking elements merit highlighting here.

### **A counternarrative of immigration**

The study demonstrates the importance of doing this work to unearth stories that are counter to the dominant messages that exist. Given the proliferation of studies on immigrants within the last decade, one might question the relevance of doing more work in this area. However, Romero and Stewart (1999) point out that there are master narratives and counternarratives in each story. The counternarratives are complex stories that countervail the ways in which we have been led to understand social situations. The master narrative of immigration is one of men who leave their countries in search of better opportunities and the (less often mentioned) women who follow to accompany or support these men. Hurtado (1999) argues that women can be primary agents who leave home for their families' benefit. The current study reveals a counternarrative that is similar to that presented by Hurtado. However, in this data we also see evidence that younger women migrate with their own motivations, with an interest in opportunities for *themselves* as well as their families and, in some cases, their community.

The complexity of this new narrative is that although leaving home promises the possibility of wider economic and social choices, tradition has a long and persistent arm that exerts its effect long after women have left home and in many cases, retains its influence across generations. As Springfield (1997) points out, "To Caribbean women,

‘home’ is both a site of communal wisdom and a place of sexual oppression” (p. xiii). As the data of the current study show, leaving home is a complicated turning point that opens new doors but strengthens the sealant around others.

### **The costs of “split consciousness”**

Kesho Yvonne Scott (1991, p.15) cited hooks’ (1984) reference to Black women’s “complex triple consciousness” when she discussed how being Black and female allows a way of knowing and seeing the world that is infused with gender, class and race consciousness. Similarly, Fine and Zane (1991, p.90) refer to the “rich split consciousness” possessed by low-income adolescent women attending a public high school, which enabled them to think about and view the complexities of the world in ways that were sometimes simultaneously creative and restraining. Both of these concepts have roots in DuBois’ (1903/1982) important classic concept, double consciousness, which refers to the need of the (visibly) stigmatized person to view himself or his group through the eyes of the critical, non-stigmatized other. This sense of twoness, split or triple awareness does not define the reality of persons who are not stigmatized.

Fine and Zane (1991) found that low-income women who had learnt to disregard the complexities of their gender, race and class realities and believe in a just, linear progression between their individual efforts and their life outcomes were more likely to successfully negotiate the public school system. Similarly, the data in the current study show that most women believe in their ability to achieve their goal of a college degree. However, their view of this prospect is colored but not obscured by a prism reflecting their intersecting social identities. This sense of possibility may be maintained by their

original motivations – the significant sacrifices they made in leaving their homes of birth order to access an educational opportunity. But at what cost do these participants achieve this end? When we compare the resources, facilities and outcomes of the two colleges in this study, we see that in both cases, students end up being marginalized. Students attending the predominantly White institution are minority students (i.e., members of a marginalized group) in a respected college; those in the predominantly Black college are majority students in a marginalized institution that is struggling to retain its accreditation. To persist, in either setting, is to achieve an academic goal that has different but arguably equal long-term costs.

### **Variation in women's responses to marginalization**

The study provides evidence that Caribbean-born women do feel marginalized and have a response to this marginalization. Their response is, in many ways, consistent with the theory of positive marginality. However, the major misfit between the theory and this group's experience is the absence of the women being explicitly organized around any panethnic activist or advocacy structure. One explanation for this finding is based on the historical development of social movements. As a group, Caribbean-born women of color are not considered central to the historically significant US rights movements and there is currently no major political or social movement that promotes Caribbean interests in the US. The study does demonstrate ways in which individual women act on behalf of each other and members of their Caribbean community. Nevertheless, there was very little evidence of an interest in or involvement in any African movement that spans national-origin identities. Panethnicity was not evidenced, therefore, in the way Espiritu (2002), writing about Asian American panethnicity,

maintained that culturally (or politically) distinct Asian groups have come together to build political unity based on similarity of experiences endured in the US.

Another way to explain the absence of panethnic organization in the group is suggested by Scott (1991), who maintained that the inequities Black women encountered in the workplace, school, rights movements and in the White media forced Black women to develop what she describes as 'habits of surviving'. She argues, "The wonder is that education can take place, careers advance, and some positive sense of self develop when so much energy must be consumed by guardedness and defense strategies' (p.185). Scott adds that this dilemma is compounded when oppressions are encountered within institutions in the Black community and women must hone strategies to resist these, as well. The habits of survival, defined as external adjustments and internal adaptations that people make to economic exploitation and to racial and gender-related oppression, can become obstacles to personal and group growth.

The data from the current study that are not adequately explained by positive marginality are consistent with Scott's formulation. Undoubtedly, the women are advancing academically and show strong indications of having a future enhanced by a US college education. With all the lines they walk while tending to their own development – family obligations, jobs, commitments to people in their home country, adjustment issues and immigration concerns – many Caribbean women may perceive their involvement in a global, unifying Afrocentric movement to be impossible. They simply do not see themselves as having the time or the mental energy required for group participation.

Beyond this very practical explanation lies another, which takes into account the diversity of origin and outlook among people of African ancestry who live in America.

This is not a homogenous group and “no single concept can capture its full complexity or satisfy all who fall within its bounds” (Blauner, 2000; p.238). Perhaps it is as yet unrealistic to expect a global political movement that would unify women of diverse African cultural backgrounds, since many of the issues that concern them, although important, do not concern them all equally. If this is true, then the time has not yet come when Caribbean-born women in US colleges demonstrate consistent, significant panethnic commitment across college campuses.

### **Intersecting (and dissecting) identities**

Although the statuses of race, ethnicity, nationality and panethnicity may be separated for variable specificity and thematic analysis, these statuses are not separate. Indeed, they are intertwined with each other and with other complicated identities these women hold with them in all aspects of their daily life and hence, share in influencing their experiences. Master statuses shift, depending on contexts, but multiple statuses and identities are with us all the time. Similarly, community membership is nuanced and multiply defined. As is demonstrated in the chapters on community/exclusion and gender negotiation, it was challenging to tease apart the relationship between these multiple categories of inclusion and exclusion and to determine their separate influences on the participants’ experiences as immigrant students.

Jordan (1998) wrote an essay that illustrates how the dynamic natures of multiple identities results in unpredictable points of disconnect and connection. Jordan describes the divide she felt between herself, a Black woman on vacation from her job as a college professor and Olive, the maid who cleaned Jordan’s hotel room in the Bahamas. Race and their gender could not connect these two women across the divide of their class. Back at

work on campus, Jordan observed a connection between an Irish-American woman and a South African immigrant woman as one helped the other escape the ravages of living with an alcoholic man. This was an experience Jordan had not had, therefore she was unable to share in the sister-like bond that transcended race to join these two women like sisters. Distinguishing between a common imposed identity and the individual identity that will be chosen if a choice is possible, Jordan notes that race, class, and gender are not automatic elements of connection and argues that, quite often, connection lies in what we can do for each other.

One area in which the perception of difference was prominent in this study was in the way participants distinguished themselves from persons of African ancestry who were born in the US. Using Jordan's premise to consider the case of relations between Caribbean-born and American-born women of African ancestry in the US college setting, it is possible to see where this may actually be one of the few social settings wherein these two groups of women can help each other. Since their individual group numbers are so small, their collective voice will make a stronger statement on the concerns of women in color in academia. Together, they may be better able to name discrimination and its marginalizing effects and collectively, they may be less likely to view problems historically directed toward women of color as challenges to be overcome by individual responsibility. Applying Jordan's line of reasoning, if these two groups of Black women can identify what they can do for each other, then they'll find the connection.

As Collins (2000) points out, transnational coalitions among women of color remain difficult, but they are necessary for a more effective approach to addressing the challenges women of African ancestry face throughout the Diaspora. In the study we see

evidence of transnational coalitions, although for most women these did not extend beyond Caribbean nationals. This community was an important base from which participants dealt with the challenges they faced. Many students valued spaces within the educational structure that reinforced their cultural diversity. This finding is consistent with Tierney's (1993) critical perspective and demonstrates how students' resistance incorporated their cultural values for their own survival.

### **Liberating effects (and limits) of higher education**

The education system is an aspect of the social structure that has significant influence on the experiences and trajectories of immigrant women and their families. Education represents one route to economic advancement -- an important goal for immigrants from developing countries. However, their access to education, specifically higher education, is influenced by policy decisions regarding admissions criteria, the availability of financial aid, the development of remedial programs, and the design and implementation of programs to ensure their successful transition into a new system of instruction and assessment. Other influences on the educational experiences of these women operate at the community, family and interpersonal levels. Traditional gender roles (e.g., homemaker, mother, and caretaker of the elderly) and attitudes toward women and education sometimes hamper their ability to pursue higher education. On the other hand, friendships, relationships and access to their ethno-cultural community provide important social support functions for this group and lessen some of the difficulties of negotiating the dominant context.

**Relevance and application**

Recent work demonstrates the insufficiency of basing inquiries of diversity in US schools on the dichotomy of Black and White students (Seller and Weis, 1997). The current study not only highlights the complex interaction of race, class and gender within the context of public schooling, but also examines those forces outside this locale that drive those multidirectional transactions. Further, the study unearths those personal and social resources women have mobilized to ensure their access to, and persistence through college.

This study of immigrant women of color in higher education has theoretical and potential practical relevance. The findings have the potential to inform academic discourse on access, resistance and resilience in education and extend the definition and applications of marginality theories. These findings challenge and expand the theoretical applications of the emerging concept of positive marginality, and may influence the development of new theory on the socio-cultural and psychological adaptation of immigrant women of color, particularly those attending public colleges in an ethnically diverse, urban setting. By shedding light on how women's lives are lived in the contexts of cross-cultural and educational transitions, these findings have the potential to influence policy decisions and practice related to women, women of color, immigrants, and foreign-born students. Together, the theoretical advances and practical applications of this work may provide a basis for re-evaluating educators' responsibilities to non-traditional students, and might inform interventions designed to address the needs of this currently under-served group.

## Appendices

## Appendix A – Focus Group Consent Form

My name is Tracy McFarlane and I am a student at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York. For my dissertation, I am conducting focus groups with Caribbean-born women who are CUNY undergraduate students. The title of the study is Intersections in Social Transitions: Caribbean Women in US Higher Education.

Your participation involves discussing your college experiences in a group of 5 – 7 women who were also born in the Caribbean and are now students on your campus. The discussions should run for no longer than two hours, will take place on your college campus and will be audiotaped. In these discussions, we will be talking about negative and positive aspects of your educational experiences, however, you are not obligated to discuss anything you are not comfortable talking about.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. The information you provide will be confidential. No personal information will be used to identify the tapes or transcripts of the tapes, which will be stored in a locked file cabinet. I plan to do presentations and write papers based on the data I collect; however, I will not include any information that could be used to identify you.

Thank you for considering this study. Today you are contributing by providing information about non-traditional college students. Your comments will help to raise consciousness about some of the challenges Caribbean women face as college students, and the ways in which we deal with those challenges. And of course, you are helping me to complete my dissertation.

Please call me at (212) 817-7545 with any question you may have about this study or my advisor, Professor Suzanne Ouellette at (212) 817-8708. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in research, you may contact Hilry Fisher in the Office of Sponsored Research, The Graduate Center at (212) 817-7523.

I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

---

I agree to be audiotaped:      Yes    No    [circle one]

I agree to participate in the focus group      Yes    No    [circle one]

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B – Life Story Interview Consent Form

My name is Tracy McFarlane and I am a student at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York. For my dissertation, I am conducting a study of Caribbean-born women who are CUNY undergraduate students. The title of the study is Intersections in Social Transitions: Caribbean Women in US Higher Education.

You participated in a focus group discussion of your college experiences, which took place on your campus. You are now being invited to participate in an in-person interview, to be scheduled for a time and place that is convenient to you. The interview will focus on your life before you came to America, your motivations for leaving home, and the various aspects of your life that are important to you, including how these might affect your experience as a college student.

Your continued participation in the study is completely voluntary. The information you provide will be confidential. No personal information will be used to identify the tapes or transcripts of the tapes, which will be stored in a locked file cabinet. I plan to do presentations and write papers based on the data I collect; however, I will not include any information that could be used to identify you.

Thank you for the part you have already played in this study, and for your continued assistance. Please call me at (212) 817-7545 with any question you may have about this study or my advisor, Professor Suzanne Ouellette at (212) 817-8708. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in research, you may contact Hilry Fisher in the Office of Sponsored Research, The Graduate Center at (212) 817-7523.

I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

---

I agree to be audiotaped:      Yes    No    [circle one]

I agree to participate in the focus group      Yes    No    [circle one]

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C – Background Questionnaire

Date \_\_\_\_\_

College \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Code # \_\_\_\_\_

**(To be assigned)****Background Information**

1. Date of birth: Month \_\_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_ (Age \_\_\_\_\_)

2. How long have you been living in the United States? \_\_\_\_\_ years.

3. Year of immigration to the US \_\_\_\_\_

4. How old were you when you moved here? \_\_\_\_\_ years old.

5. Where did you grow up? (Name the country): \_\_\_\_\_

6. Highest level of education completed before moving here: check [] one1. [] Less than high school2. [] Some high school3. [] Completed high school with High School Diploma or Certificate4. [] Some college or vocational school or Associate Degree5. [] Completed college with Bachelors Degree9. [] Other (please write in) \_\_\_\_\_

7. What's your major? (please write in): \_\_\_\_\_

8. How long have you been a student in this college? \_\_\_\_\_ (Semesters)

9. Did you transfer any credits from another college?

[  ] (0) No[  ] (1) Yes → check [] all that apply1. [] overseas college/university2. [] community college3. [] other undergraduate college8. Have you lived anywhere else **before** you came to the United States?[  ] (0) No[  ] (1) Yes → Where else have you lived? (country): \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D – Focus Group Guide

Tell me about life at (name of college). What is it like here?

Is it like when you were in school back home? Why do you say that?

What's hard about going to school for you now? Why do you think it's like that?

How do you deal with the difficulties you experience?

Do you think transferring to another school would be a good idea? Why/why not?

What would be a good school to go to in NY? Why?

What's easy about being a student here? Why do you think it's like that?

When you are at school, are you very conscious of yourself being Caribbean? Why do you feel that way?

Is it sometimes hard to communicate with other people? Do they have difficulty understanding you? How do you deal with that?

Is there any benefit in being a Caribbean student here? What?

What are the disadvantages?

Do Caribbean students stick together on campus? In the cafeteria? In the library?

Do you share notes with each other? Past exams? Tips about faculty?

For those who do, is it with other Caribbean students in general, or with others from your country?

What about with students from other countries? Latinas? Russians? Africans? American kids?

What about when you're back in the neighborhood, do you tend to hang with people from the Caribbean (or from your country)?

What do you think the people who make decisions about this school could do to make it better for you? Why do you think they're not doing these things?

What could you do as a group that would make things better at (college)? Do you do anything like that? Why?

## Appendix E – Life Story Interview Guide

As a girl growing up, did you think a lot about what your life would be like when you grew up?

How is that different from what you are doing now?

How did you manage to stay on track? (Or: What changes did you have to make?)

As you got older, who made plans about what your life would be like? What did they (he/she) expect? How did you feel about those expectations? How have those plans turned out?

Tell me what life was like for you in your home country.

Tell me the story of why you moved to the United States

When you moved here, what were your first impressions?

Were things as (or different from what) you expected them to be? In what ways were they different or the same?

What were your plans? For your self, your spouse, your children? How are those plans working out?

Was going to college a big part of your plans for yourself?

Tell me about life at (name of college). Tell me about the time you decided to enroll. Why did you choose this college? What is it like there? Is it different from when you were in school/college back home? Why do you say that?

What's hard about going to school for you now? Why do you think it's like that?

How do you deal with the difficulties you experience?

Do you think transferring to another school would be a good idea for you? Why/why not?

What could you do to make things better at (college)? Do you do anything like that?

What's easy about being a college student for you? Why do you think it's like that?

If you were to win a million dollars today, would you keep working toward the degree?

Why/why not?

Have you lived in any other US city before living in New York? Do people treat you differently (in the US) in New York than you were treated back home? Please explain.

What's good about being a (nationality)? Do you think American-born people see it that way? Do you think other people from (country) would agree with you?

What's not so good about being a (nationality)? Why do you say that? Who else thinks so, Americans or just (nationality)?

In general, how are women regarded in (country). Is that different from how women are regarded in the US?

## Appendix F – Preliminary Data Codes

<u>Social Marginalization</u>	<u>Positive Marginality</u>	<u>Resistance</u> (cont'd)
Stigmatized at home	Positive view of own ethnicity/gender/class	Loudness
At school	The margin as choice/ value of the margin	Code switching
In the community	Belief that social structures influence indiv. circumstances	Activism - organizing for change
On the job	Social activism - desire to work for self and others	<u>Tradition</u>
In public settings		Women's roles
<u>Stigma related to</u>	<u>Academic Persistence</u>	What's at stake?
Race	<i>Challenges related to the institution:</i> admin. offices, transfer credits, support services, faculty/student interaction	Conflicting values
Nationality		The 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation: raising 'American' children
Class		On becoming American
Gender		The glass ceiling (class)
Immigration status		Retaining tradition & cultural practices
<u>Reasons for immigrating</u>		<u>My Big Assumptions</u>
Personal (for self)		Socially marginalized
Family (children, spouse)	<i>Challenges of part-time study:</i> nights, weekends, no access to services, no extra-curricular involvement	Psychological well-being/absence of pathology
Other	<i>Personal challenges:</i> finances, time, ed'nal background, language, pop culture, accent, mode of dress, classroom and campus norms	Resilient
<u>Specific Goals</u>		Community a buffer
Better jobs		<u>Potential Misfits w. Theory</u>
More money		Academic performance not related to community/culture
Education		No interest in activism
Broader cultural exposure		Hopelessness
Technological advancements		Poor academic performance: academic probation, behavioral problems
Personal growth		No social network
Geographical change	<i>Personal/cultural resources:</i> the ethnic neighborhood, study partners, social network, family, friends, church, social groups	She is marginalized but group is not
<u>Why Higher Ed?</u>	<i>Structural assistance:</i> work-study, fin aid, public assistance,	Group is marginalized but does not affect her
Econ advancement		Sees margin as an imposition; detrimental
Career change/mobility	<u>Resistance</u>	
Challenge to self	Silence	
Make family proud	Stopping out	
Prove to others	Oppositional identity	
Upward social mobility		
<u>Identity</u>		
Primary group id		
Personal identity –		
Social roles		

## Appendix G – Prominent Data Codes [Grouped]

College Lessons	Colonization/Colonial	Migration as a benefit
Ways of Teaching & Learning	Legacies	Migration as a sacrifice
Classroom Culture	History	Not my choice
Obstacles/Challenges to Schooling	Language	Unmet/met expectations
Group Excellence	Educational Systems	Expectations Exceeded
Individual Performance	Globalization	
	Cultural Domination	Social Class
Gender Discrimination	Economic Domination	Place in Society
Gender Roles/burdens		Approved Behaviour
Gender Traditions	The Margin	Social Decline
	Costs/Benefits of the Margin	Upward Mobility
Community Membership	Choice/Force	Financial Resources
Identity		Regard/Prominence
External Labeling	Respect	Invisibility/disregard
Social Support	Manners	
Nationality	Social Norms	Adjustment
Ethnicity	Personal Responsibility	Overall Immigration
Panethnicity		Adjustments
	Perceptions of College	Family Adjustments
Laughter	Disappointments	School Adjustments
Silences	College pride	
Pauses	Suggestions for Improvement	Race/Racism
Repetition	College Reputation	Group Perceptions
Code Switching		Group Memberships
Caveats	Activism	Racial Diversity
Qualifying Statements	Student organizing	Racial Hierarchy
	Individual acts of charity	Stereotypes
	Student representation	Target of Racism
		Being Racist
		Black Identity
		Invisibility/disregard
	Motivations/Outcomes of Migration	
		Faith/Religious Beliefs

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