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# Between Two Worlds: Stories of the Second- Generation Black Caribbean Immigrant

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**Yndia S. Lorick-Wilmot**

People have an endless fascination with character information since it helps us to predict the behavior of those we interact with (King, Rumbaugh, and Savage-Rumbaugh 1999). Stories or narratives serve as an extension of this fascination. They help us make better decisions even without supplying immediate information. When we each talk about the past, our stories not only disclose currently relevant social particulars, but also provide tools for reasoning about action—our own and others'. In many instances, the stories we tell offer explanations of an outcome that resulted when we acted upon something—or serve as indirect memories of a place or a past event that guides our decisions today. Alternatively, the stories we tell can merely introduce us to a range of behaviors and experiences so that we have a richer context for understanding when we encounter something new.

We tell stories because they appeal to our social intelligence. Storytelling arises out of our capacity to understand one another and direct others' attention to real events. In the narrative process, the storyteller is a problem-solver, an individual with the capacity and preference to make strategic choices within particular situations, making different kinds of appeals to the cognitive preference and expectation of the listener. In

doing so, the storyteller points to the challenges faced, choices made, and outcomes learned that could, ultimately, inspire the listener and move him or her toward some action. For those of us especially interested or engaged in community building, stories give expression to the histories and lives of people across our communities. Listening to and understanding these stories provide us the opportunity to explain why the people we listen to do what they do, and the impact their behaviors and experiences have in the overall vitality of our community. Put simply, to be an “understander” of the world is also to be an explainer of the world—and stories help us do this.

So, why are stories of second-generation<sup>1</sup> black Caribbean immigrants important? What do these stories tell us? Moreover, what do these stories mean to local racial-ethnic communities as a whole? The immigrant story is one that is deeply intertwined with our broader community story. Similar to the stories of hope and promise of a better life, of acclimation and resistance, that are told about the approximate five million African Americans who migrated to the North and West from the South during the Great Migration (1900–1960s), the black immigrant story is also embedded in the social and economic fabric of our community. Black immigrants, and particularly those who came to the United States between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s from the Caribbean, contributed to a 25 percent growth of the black population in the United States. As such, the presence of these immigrants has helped to change the cultural, economic, linguistic, and ethnic landscape of the overall black population in the United States we see today (Kent 2007).

In fact, scholars have noticed these demographic changes specifically in communities in urban epicenters where many black Caribbean immigrants migrated and have affirmed the increasing significance of their presence in the United States. They have looked to black Caribbean immigrants’ everyday stories of hope and of struggle to shed light on the pathways they have taken that have ultimately affected and contributed to community development. These stories, both written and oral, point to a rich body of social discourse on migration and the first-generation immigrant experience. Such stories elucidate the ways these immigrants influence urban epicenters by spurring the economy as entrepreneurs,

enhancing American music and literature, making new discoveries as scientists and engineers, serving as staunch advocates for social and political change, and defending American ideals at home and abroad as leaders in the military. Such contributions have even led President Obama to proclaim the month of June National Caribbean American month.

Yet the narrative or story of the black Caribbean immigrant experience in our community is not limited to the first generation but importantly includes the experiences of their American-born children. Scholars have argued that the second-generation also grapples with developing notions of place, identity, and citizenship just as much as their immigrant predecessors. For an adult child of black Caribbean immigrants in particular, the construction and fluidity of racial and ethnic identity connote an “in-between-ness” of experience as being both “black in America” and “a child of a black immigrant in America.” The stories the second-generation tell can elucidate (1) the ways race and ethnic identities are defined, formed, and reshaped in accordance with systemic operations of nationhood, class, religion, gender and sexuality; and (2) whether this generation is enmeshed in similar transnational networks and have transnational sensibilities like their parents’ generation. As such, stories of the second-generation black Caribbean immigrants can help to underscore how the global interconnectedness of national cultures and identities, political systems, and economies continues to shape both the flow and adaptation of various black migrant populations and the diversity of our nation’s urban epicenters.

Among extant sociological scholarship on race and ethnic identity, assertions of black immigrants in the United States (Kasinitz, Mollenkoe, and Waters 2002), only a few scholars have used narrative to show the awareness of the everyday impacts of race, gender/sexuality, and class as articulated in the life stories of second-generation black Caribbean immigrants. In this article, I will explore racial-ethnic identity formation among second-generation black Caribbean immigrants in a way that examines identity, conceptual narrative, and the potential impact on intracommunity relationships.

Using a sampling of semi-structured interviews with ten second-generation English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and French-speaking self-identified, middle-class black Caribbean immigrants, I explore the

identity consciousness and negotiation of race and ethnicity in the narratives of second-generation black Caribbean immigrant adults in the United States. To do so, I employ an internarrative identity approach to explore the way these second-generation black Caribbean immigrants articulate the continuity and contradictory aspects of identity and transnational experiences into a coherent and overarching way of viewing themselves and their communities. An internarrative identity approach, as developed and coined by philosopher Ajit Maan, is a method of understanding how people's identities (i.e., race, gender, and/or class) are articulated and expressed in stories in alternate but coherent ways. This approach is a departure from traditional narrative analyses that are perceived to privilege narrative structures "from patriarchal, middle class, and European colonial traditions" of storytelling. Instead, an internarrative identity approach edifies the nuances and multiplicity of subordinated identities that give shape to people's stories about their own complex lives and experiences in the face of dominant master narratives (Maan 2010:5). Here, I argue the perception of self as behaving and enacting identity is critical to understanding the negotiations and practice of racial-ethnic identity for second-generation black Caribbean immigrants. I contend the second-generation black Caribbean immigrant, whose "between two worlds" experiences and identity assertions are situated within local and racialized contexts, are a result of family and community dynamics, employment, and other transnational connections both in the United States and abroad.

## **Methods**

It has been argued that second-generation black Caribbean immigrant identity is relatively unstable, and that over time these individuals either choose to become American-identified or ethnic-identified (Waters 1999). Yet this binary does not clearly tell a story about the factors, the interpretation of events, and the enmeshment of transnational networks and community that influence identity formation and assertion for this second generation. Instead, my research does this by focusing on the narratives of ten adults self-identified as second-generation black Caribbean immigrants who are middle class. The data for these narratives consist of in-depth, semi-structured

telephone and in-person interviews with five men and five women in their late 20s to mid-40s. Participants were born in the United States between the late 1960s and 1987, ranging in age from 25 to 45 at the time of interview. The majority of participants were married, two were divorced, and one was single. In addition, seven reported having children between the ages of 3 and 17. In terms of their parents' countries of origin, many participants' parents represent the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the Caribbean. Participants reported having parents who emigrated from Puerto Rico and the countries of Jamaica, Haiti, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Antigua, Trinidad, Grenada, and Barbados. Their parents came to the United States during the span of years immediately following the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 (approximately 1966–1967) through 1985. Participants also discussed having traveled at least once as a child or adolescent to the country of birth of their parent(s), where they spent time visiting with extended family members who remained behind in those areas.

While several participants have lived in various cities across the United States as well as abroad, at the time of the interview, many resided in major cities along the Eastern Seaboard—three in the Greater Boston area, five in the New York City/New Jersey area, one in Miami and one in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. These cities embody many of the economic, educational, and social forces that frame the settlement motivations of post-1965 immigrants from the Caribbean to the United States as well as the expected economic and educational outcomes for their children.

Participants self-identified as middle class and reported annual incomes between \$55,000 and \$93,000 from semiprofessional or professional occupations.<sup>2</sup> They also reported the following highest educational degrees attained: four with bachelor's degrees, two with master's degrees, one with a dual degree in law and a master's of business administration, two doctorates, and one with a doctor of medicine degree who was completing a residency.

Recruiting participants was uniquely challenging because the label of “second-generation Caribbean immigrant” is not one widely used among social service institutions, affinity associations, and community-based organizations that identify and interact with the adult children of black Caribbean immigrants. Hence, the recruitment

strategy included snowball sampling, which provided a way of gaining access to a population that is regarded as relatively “invisible” because of its in-between status (i.e., not first-generation immigrant, American-born but not necessarily African American identified, and not poor or working class)—without basing selection criteria in particular racial-ethnic identity outcomes. As Table 1 shows, there is great diversity in the participants’ identity assertions, and as such, they should not be taken as set in stone.

**Table 1**  
**Participant Characteristics: Personal Interviews Conducted by the Author between 2010 and 2012**

<b>Name, Age, Sex</b>	<b>Race-Ethnicity (Self-Identification)</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Parents’ Place of Birth</b>
Daniel, 44 Male	Black Haitian, Caribbean	JD/MBA	Attorney	Haiti
Derrick, 29 Male	Latino Black	BA	Hospital Administrator	Costa Rica
Eddy, 31 Male	Mixed Race Black	BA	Planning Strategist	Jamaica
Erica, 28 Female	West Indian- American	BA	Sales Representative	Trinidad and Grenada
Lisa, 34 Female	Caribbean American Black	MD	Physician; Residency	Jamaica and Panama
Marshal, 44 Male	Black Caribbean American African American	BA	Policy Advocate	Panama and Dominica
Michelle, 35 Female	Black Latina Dominican	MA	Elementary Education/ Teacher	Dominican Republic
Natalie, 41 Female	West Indian Black American	PhD	Professor	Barbados
Robert, 37 Male	Black Caribbean descent	MA	Marketing Executive	Antigua
Shana, 37 Female	Mixed, Black Boricua	PhD	Artist and Community Organizer	Puerto Rico and Cuba

Many of the participants' narratives expressed various interrelated, complicated ways of telling of how it is to be a second-generation black Caribbean immigrant growing up and living in the United States. Thus, the findings should be viewed as illustrating specific trends and practices as explained in stories among a particular group of second-generation black Caribbean immigrants.

Taking seriously both the individual need for "telling one's story" and the sociological importance of narrative, tenets of grounded theory were employed to analyze interviews. Grounded theory is an approach to doing qualitative research that begins by gathering data from a variety of sources, including interviews and field observations, analyzing data and coding, and constructing theories (inductively derived from the data) in order to understand phenomena (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Here, particular attention was paid to how participants accounted for events that seemed to conflict with previous racial-ethnic identity assertions or events that required them to assert, define, and/or redefine their racial and ethnic identity. I used an internarrative identity approach to understand how participants author their narratives: how they organize, (re)interpret, and frame their realities and lived experiences; how they become who they assert themselves to be; and how they make sense of what it means to be "black in America," as children of black Caribbean immigrants in local black communities. I contend that individuals use narratives or stories to construct and reconstruct cultural and social meanings that they themselves, family members, friends and/or coworkers, and the broader society have attached to their lived experiences (Gergen 2001). In this regard, it was not only important to treat the narrative as more than a compilation of events that "just happen," but also as a means through which identities and networks are fashioned.

### **The Second-Generation Black Caribbean Immigrant Storyteller**

As I mentioned earlier, the process of "telling one's story" engages both storyteller and audience. Both storyteller and audience attempt to make sense of what has happened and is happening by assembling or in some way integrating these events and/or experiences within one or more narrative. The temporal nature of reflection that occurs as a result of listening to and retelling stories implicates



author and audience as active agents in producing and challenging systems of social control and oppression. Both author and audience are guided to act in certain ways based upon the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity of available cultural models that inform existing social, public, and cultural narratives.

In this regard, the self or selfhood, as noted philosopher Paul Ricoeur refers to it, does not exist objectively and independently but instead is brought into being and is shaped by the continued reinforcement of social forces that individuals “emplot” y<sup>3</sup> in their narrative. For Ricoeur, narrative identity is what lies at the heart of reflexive self-understanding. He argues that people appropriate stories, which are shaped by past and present events that are handed down through time and culture. Ricoeur’s notion of narrative and identity suggests that one’s individual (and perhaps group) identity is often developed without his or her control. Through narrative constructions, as Ricoeur suggests, “narrative identity becomes a sense of self-sameness, continuity in the story a person tells about himself or herself; the narrative becomes the person’s actual history” (Ricoeur 1988).

Scholars such as Ricoeur who theorize about authorial voice and storytelling contend that the stories people tell about themselves can change through the course of one’s life even though an individual’s sense of self can remain consistent. On the other hand, a postmodernist approach—which I lean more toward—suggests the opposite: that one’s identity is not only coherent but also fluid and changeable. I contend that a narrative identity is, in fact, reflective of the relationship between an individual’s interaction with others (people and social institutions) and the temporal nature of one’s individual and group identity (i.e., race and ethnicity, gender, class, and so on) (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1961; Gubrium and Holstein 1990). I argue that this subtle but important distinction of the process of authoring gives individuals, and especially the marginalized, oppressed, and/or the “invisible” (and in this case the second-generation black Caribbean immigrant), the agency to reject a “master<sup>4</sup>” or monolithic narrative of their lives and their identity assertions (i.e., as either American identified or ethnic identified only).

Using an internarrative identity approach, I contend, is an effective way to examine stories of the second-generation black Caribbean

immigrant. This approach allows for the exploration of the ways these adults have agency and voice to tell stories in a manner that defies a “western normative ideal for autobiographical narrative” around their own identity construction and assertion around their “blackness,” conceptions of community, and transnational consciousness. This approach also recognizes a storyteller’s control over the ways in which his or her own story is told (Maan 2005). Philosopher Ajit Maan, for example, argues that the story an author shares expresses identities of self in ways that are contextualized and highly relational, so that—in a postmodern view—its inconsistency is not a threat to one’s self, but makes sense in defining “Who am I?” As a result, the story structure becomes less about being linear, chronological, or adhering to Western ideals regarding universalist principals of behavior and identity assertion, but rather more about the author’s control over his or her own story, without necessarily changing the subject.

For the second-generation black Caribbean immigrant, telling stories is where a sense of identity is negotiated and creation of meaning happens. Identity refers to the various meanings attached to oneself and others and in various social spaces through relationships implied by that identity (Gecas and Burke 1995). Each of us maintains a collection of self-identities, each based on occupying particular roles at particular times (Stryker 1968; Burke and Reitzes 1981). These various roles influence behavior because each role has a set of associated societal meanings and expectations. In addition to one’s individual self-identity, most people also occupy social group memberships through which they simultaneously identify, negotiate, find, and make meaning. People categorize, evaluate, and compare themselves with others who they perceive to be similar to or different from them; this process is often done in stereotypical terms. These cognitive representations, which describe and prescribe beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors, vary in their salience and determine the extent to which social group-related and personal characteristics influence an individual’s feelings, actions, and self-definition (Barnett and Baruch 1985; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Marks 1977; Sieber 1974).

Despite the opportunities available to people to identify and make meaning, it is the continuum between individual and social group identities—and the shifts along this continuum—that are not always easy to

negotiate. Particularly for racial-ethnic populations, including black immigrants and their adult children who experience similar historical marginalization, social stigmatization, and a master status<sup>4</sup> that often relegates them to a lower socioeconomic position, negotiating identity and social identity can buffer negative experiences related to their exclusion (Benson 2006; Davis 1991; Rong and Fitchett 2008; Stepick, Rey, and Mahler 2009).

While the socially deterministic power of a black master status has crucial consequences for individuals' experiences, race and immigration scholars have looked to the ways black Caribbean immigrants and their American-born children consciously develop complex perceptions about race and ethnicity that influence both their self-concept and racial-ethnic identification. Their complex awareness of race and ethnicity is articulated in the identity assertions they make. It is also evident in the circumstances under which they choose to assert particular identities and the stories they tell to express their internalization of perceived cultural worth for these identities—as individuals and part of a broader racial group.

The experience of marginalization and historical subjugation are considered important motivations for the telling of narratives because the need to resist invisibility or feelings of being subsumed within another social group is heightened for those who are excluded. In this regard, narratives become more than ordered accounts of the past or stories that are related in a specific context. They become tactics of the marginalized to gain and assert power over defining self—"Who am I?"—through authoring their own stories (de Certeau 1984). For many second-generation black Caribbean immigrants, however, their racial (and often economic) status relegates their existence to dominant cultural traditions and conceptual systems around race, ethnicity, and language. Arguably, this status could limit their own constructions of selfhood as children of black Caribbean immigrants and Americans. This sort of double bind—an "in-between-ness" of not fully belonging and of yearning for a home they have never really known—is an important sociological narrative space for multicultural minority communities (Maan 2005). It undermines the dominant discourse and assumptions about a particular race-ethnic identity and embraces narrative connections between these seemingly incommensurable world views (Maan, 2005).

## Findings

In listening to and analyzing the ten participants' interviews, their stories often elucidated how they defined and described their feelings of "in-between-ness." This finding comports with current race and immigration scholarship (Gratton 2002; Rumbaut 1994, 2004; Brandon 2002; Farley and Alba 2002; Fernandez-Kelley and Konczal 2005), which contends that the second generation does not always share their immigrant parents' world view about race and ethnicity, gender roles and expectations, and child rearing. At the same time, the scholarship also finds that this same second-generation population does not always share the world view of whoever they consider to be "mainstream" Americans, despite their experience of growing up and becoming middle-class adults in America—a place, culture, and social setting that is vastly different from the one in which their parents came of age (Kasinitz, Mollenkope, and Waters 2002; Waters 1994). The second-generation black Caribbean immigrant, arguably, lives in a world of new and shifting racial-ethnic, class, gender, and economic divisions of which outsiders may be only barely aware.

Participants' articulation of this "in-between" status was not considered negatively because of their difficulty in conforming to stereotypes of one sociocultural context (e.g., Caribbean or African American). On the contrary, their stories demonstrated their access to and familiarity with conceptual systems related to race and ethnicity, class, culture, language, and ontology. The men and women interviewed told their stories in ways that demonstrated how they each learned, unlearned, and relearned race-based systems, cultural codes, and the workings of the dominant culture in their lives. This shifting may be due in part to transnational ties and sociopolitical affiliations that the second-generation maintains in the Caribbean (e.g., via low-cost travel and Internet-based communications, and attaining dual citizenship) and in their local urban communities. Having a foot in two worlds prevents them from sitting comfortably in either.

Participants actively engaged in the re-associative process of an internarrative story structure, which is the act of bringing the "sense of the past into the present by being consciously aware of past and future in the present moment" (Maan 1999: 49). In doing so, they often contextualized, internalized, and redefined events in a new narrative that

integrates past experiences and new perceptions, insights, and associations. For example, many participants shared stories that pointed to instances where they were taught to live according to two often-contrasting sets of cultural traditions and social expectations: America's way and their parents' way. Here, Derrick (see Table 1) reflected on the challenges of being born in America to immigrant parents:

I am proud to be doing better than my own parents. They've worked hard. But I work hard too. I make more money to be comfortable and to do all the right things to support my parents. I try to keep a balance, but it's exhausting. I live in two worlds: I have to survive in the world as a black man in America; at the same time, I have the obligation of family—both ones that are up here and those in the islands. My white counterparts do not have this same burden of family, so they don't understand why I am expected to give back so much.

At first glance, one might examine these types of narrative excerpts and argue that this idea of culture-clash indicates serious confusion regarding identity. After further consideration, however, an internarrative approach reveals that, in fact, there is no single correct identity, as they are fluid and constantly changing. This point is particularly true for second-generation black Caribbean immigrants, who are forced as cultural nomads to break away from Western assumptions of conflicting social roles, commitments, and duties, while developing what cultural theorist and philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to as “new narrations of older scripts,” embracing history's various and alternate meanings for their lives (Spivak 1996: 27).

For the participants interviewed, the concept of individual identity and the significance of a black ethnic group identity (albeit being a part of a larger black community) is something they have had to deal with from childhood. Many of them recalled various events in their lives that indicated to them that what they saw at home with their immigrant parents and extended family members, and what they experienced in their American neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, were often in direct conflict with each other. According to the

participants, these events informed how they interpreted and understood their racial and ethnic marginalization.

When participants talked about this marginalization, their stories often pointed to experiences in which they faced both overt and indirect racism, prejudice, exclusion, and pressured assimilation by whites and even other racial-ethnic immigrant groups (i.e., Asian Americans and Middle Eastern people). Scholars such as Mary C. Waters, Alejandro Portes, and Rubén G. Rumbaut agree that no other racial or ethnic minority group feels these paradoxes more acutely than black immigrants and their children, for whom assimilation (repression of psychological connections to the Caribbean required for successful social incorporation) means joining the ranks of a historically disenfranchised racial-ethnic group—African Americans. These second-generation participants often discussed the fact that their parents often exposed them, when they were growing up, to an array of negative opinions about African Americans and the belief that whites respond more favorably to foreign-born blacks. At the same time, these participants also realized that because they lack their parents' accents (particularly Anglophone participants) and perhaps other identifying characteristics, society is likely to identify them as African American. Here, Daniel (see Table 1) describes a time that, while driving with his infirm uncle from Haiti, police stopped them:

My uncle was visiting from Haiti. Before his trip, I told him I wanted to buy some property, and he thought it a great idea to drive through one of the neighborhoods to get a “feel” for the place. We went out on a Sunday afternoon to do that together. I slowly drove past a parked patrol car and did not think anything of it before the car came up behind us and the officer told me to pull over. The officer gets my license and registration and starts asking the “regular” questions like “What are you doing around here?” “Are you the true owner of this car?” So, my uncle in his thick accent says, “What is this? We are driving a fancy car in a nice neighborhood. We do nothing wrong. We are good people.” The officer looked away from my elderly uncle and told me that he is going to run my

information. That is when I said to the officer, “Yes, go run it.” Boy, that is when the situation escalated. Two other patrol cars arrived on the scene. The police detained us for over an hour. I was angry and humiliated. My uncle had to do a lot of explaining on my behalf. Fortunately, one of the other officers (who happened to be black) convinced the first officer to let us go on. When the first officer did so, the black officer walked over to me and leaned in my car as I got back in it to give me some “advice.” He said, “You should mind yourself when you are driving through certain neighborhoods and especially when you are by yourself. You will not always have your uncle to get you out of situations.” I decided not to buy property in that neighborhood or any other for that matter, if I could not, as a black man, drive through it without problems from the police or anyone else.

Participants often made the distinction between having a black identity and the varied black ethnicities with which they can readily identify. For them, an ethnicity connotes a connection to a specific land or place, and a long tradition of history, cultural practice, struggle, and resilience that brings people together who share, or whose foreparents share, these particular experiences. Here, Lisa (see Table 1) defines what ethnicity means to her as it relates to her self-concept around race and identity:

When I think about what it means to be black, it is also about me being Caribbean and American or Caribbean American—with the hyphen. I have a connection to the land and culture of my great- and grandparents on both sides of the family. A connection to the people, the culture, the language—everything—which is very different from the connection I have to the U.S. I mean, I am born here, but my roots are not as deep as it is for some of my friends who can trace their family history (or at least as far as they can) to certain slaveholding families. Take for instance certain

traditions my African American friends practice that no one in my family knew existed prior to coming to America. I would be a poser to say that I am an African American when my family history and cultural background is not the same. But I will not correct someone if they assume I identify as African American, since “African American” means “black” today. Because I am black in the U.S., I experience similar prejudice [that] other blacks do regardless of their ethnic background. But I will tell you this, when I travel back to Jamaica or Panama or anywhere else in the world, no one understands this “label” *African American*; I am American, black, and have Caribbean parentage.

As such, the concept of a black identity did not always mean opting to repress aspects of their Caribbean cultural heritage in order to adopt an African American ethnicity (simply because they were born in the United States), per se. Rather, being a part of a larger black community (a Diaspora of sorts), constituted a racial and cultural solidarity between native-born blacks in America and those from the Caribbean. Many participants described having adopted a transnational<sup>5</sup> racial consciousness (Quintana and Segura-Henera 2003; Quintana 2007) or, as W.E.B DuBois purports, “a double consciousness”—a racialized sense of self that also links to the multiplicity of different experiences and perspectives blacks have with race across time and space—which they believe is necessary for the survival of a multifaceted community. For example, Michelle (see Table 1) discusses her conceptualization of community and ethnicity as it relates to her notion of transnational racial consciousness:

The black community is everything I am and represent. It’s really not the “melting pot” or “fruit salad” that I learned about growing up. I am not interested in talking about race in that way. It is about impacting local communities here and also being concerned about what is happening outside of the community—across the country and around the world. Whether we were brought to America as slaves or came as immigrants, there are generations of folks that are



responsible for ensuring the uplifting of our collective circumstance economically, socially, and culturally. Whether we are Muslim, speak Spanish, are dark-skinned or not. I don't mean to sound preachy, but that's the beauty of the diversity of our people in the community. The divide and conquer that exists within our community is what is tearing us all a part.

Michelle went on to describe how she has benefited from living in communities with first- and second-generation immigrants like herself and African Americans, and the ways her community help to shape her understanding of the fluidity transnational spaces. Here, Eddy (see Table 1) describes how this notion of community has solidified his own transnational consciousness and, further, his role in making a difference in his local area:

These young men need positive examples of black men doing something positive. I stay engaged; I tutor, serve on the boards of local organizations. I've also made the effort to learn about black American history and civil rights. Caribbean people and their descendants have always been involved in the movement. I can appreciate the struggle; it's in my blood. Today, these young men don't have a clue. I am here to be their friend, a role model, to show them there are other ways to get to drive a nice car and own your own place. Now, I feel I am making black history too.

Interestingly, Eddy's notion of community, for example, could be viewed as a contradictory space of ethnic identification. For participants like Eddy and Michelle, however, who described the black community as a space of common marginality signified by a solidarity of a shared African history and ancestry, this can also be seen as a new and reconstructed sociocultural environment in which Eddy would have an identifiable part to play—as a mentor and role model to youth in his community (Hall 1997).

Education, income, and occupation are also coupled with racial characteristics in the production of a racial-ethnic identity. Arguably, the correlation scholars make between ethnic identity and social class suggests that the higher one's social class, the more incorporated an

individual is into that society. Yet many participants found that this sort of incorporation really meant that they were more likely to come into contact, and sometimes conflict, with whites. The most common encounters of this type were with colleagues. For example, one participant, Robert (see Table 1) said:

Because I am senior management, I always look professional. Tailor-made suits. I made the mistake of dressing down one day and security stopped me! I see this white guy every day; we talk every day for at least 10 minutes about sports, kids, the wives. He claims he didn't recognize me...so frustrating.... Once you look black, it doesn't matter if you're division VP or the guy from the mailroom; we're all the same.

Participants such as Robert often described instances like these as “working as an African American” because his black master status automatically subsumed him into the category of African American with its accompanying negative stereotypes. Robert went on to add that once his white colleagues became aware of his Caribbean ancestry, their attitude changed to “oh, you're different from the regular blacks,” especially in one-on-one situations. Again, as Robert described, gaining economic mobility did not necessarily guarantee social or cultural inclusion. Other participants often mentioned the initial uneasiness of being one of few high-ranking blacks at their jobs but also realized that they have had easier access to opportunities than their immigrant parents' generation. Marshal (see Table 1) adds:

Yes, I would say it has a lot to do with coming of age in the post-civil rights era. There are many more strides made for women and blacks too. There are a few more doors open for my generation than there [were] for my parents', but it is still not easy for us. I think, depending on the age of the employer, they look to my parents' generation as low-skilled “boat people.” So, yes, as an American, I have an advantage over those born outside of the U.S.—if I encounter people who are prejudiced against foreigners. Though I should say “advantage” is based on

industry, right? Other immigrant groups have stereotypes about them that, depending on their industry, I think some of them take advantage of. I will say this: the glass ceiling remains a challenge. And, even if you are able to break through that ceiling—you still have to prove that you are worthy to be up there.

Participants also told stories about their experiences in the workplace—describing their interpersonal interactions with other racial-ethnics, including other second-generation Caribbean immigrants, and the importance of asserting all aspects of their ethnic identity. Here, Lisa (see Table 1) talks about engaging in the deliberate act of code-switching as part of balancing workplace communications and having the freedom to engage in ethno-cultural linguistic practices:

Some patients are taken back when the chief attending introduces me as their doctor handling their case. I had one patient comment that I was “surprisingly articulate.” Another time, a white coworker heard me in the break room say something to two Vincentian NPs [nurse practitioners] in patois, and was surprised. I am free to speak all of these ways. I can turn it on and off when I want to and when I am comfortable.

Many others expressed that they cannot “take off the mask” because of social and professional expectations imposed upon them. Participants who also speak French or Spanish discussed having to learn when it is appropriate for them to use their bilingualism in the workplace. For some, these experiences led to feelings of dislocation and even nostalgia for their parents’ homeland. They assumed that life would be easier if they lived in a country that did not discriminate against them just because of how others perceived their blackness. For these participants, some shared their interest in attaining citizenship in their parents’ home country. Some recently had. For others, the feelings of a nostalgic bond with their parents’ home country and Caribbean culture were not as strong as they were with their immigrant parents’; there was a sort of natural acceptance of their own hybridity. Interestingly, this acceptance grew stronger as participants got older. Some described growing tired of being constantly reminded of their

otherness and not being able to live up to the conflicting expectations of the two cultures. They chose to consciously negotiate a hybrid identity of some combination of Caribbean-identified, black, Indian, Latina, American, or lesbian—as embodied in Shana’s (see Table 1) story:

Although it is trendy to be Latina and lesbian today, I am not the stereotypical light skinned, feminine, *Boricua* [Puerto Rican] we see in Jennifer Lopez. I’m the butchy, curly-haired *morena* [dark-skinned woman] and proud Boricua who celebrates her rich culture and loves her people too. But why do I have to fit into some other oppressive view of myself? A narrow lens that society uses to box me in? Life experience has taught me that I can’t live my life fitting into someone else’s mold. I define it for myself.

Shana’s multiple identities represent an interesting lens in understanding how some second-generation black Caribbean immigrants define for themselves a new way of being children of black Caribbean immigrants while being black in America and being transnational<sup>5</sup> at the same time. Though Shana considers herself to be American (because of her nativity), black (because of her light-brown skin, curly hair, and African roots), Latina (specifically Puerto Rican), and lesbian, at the same time she acknowledges a sense of cultural and civic responsibility toward her Caribbean roots and learns to use her resources and energies to give back to her community, both in the United States and Puerto Rico. She adds:

I live in the community. I see the need for Puerto Ricans to be active, socially and politically, both stateside and on the island. With our diversity, we are a powerful people. Whether we are voting on issues that affect us on the island or are protesting for or against issues here in the U.S., we need to be involved. That’s what I try to do with my art and my activism. I paint beautiful images of our people, that represent our colorful, mixed heritage—Taino, white, and African—working together to uplift each other and overcome, sort of like the famed Nuyorican Juan Sanchez does. He inspires me.... Yes, the art is about expression

of culture and history, but education is still the key. The money I raise for programs or when I sell my art, I donate it and my time to organizations in Puerto Rico and here that support young people to get a high school diploma to better themselves for their future.

Equally important as hybridity is to understanding participants' racial and ethnic identity negotiations, participants' stories about sexual identity, gender, and gender role expectations were also implicated in dominant discourses around race and ethnicity. Whether discussing issues from "coming out" to family members and marital choices to child rearing, several participants felt a familial and cultural obligation to preserve specific gender role expectations when it came to whom they should marry, who should be the breadwinner, and who should be responsible for domestic work and child rearing. For some of the men, like Daniel and Marshal (see Table 1), these expectations helped to define their notions of masculinity: to be a breadwinner, a professional, heterosexual, father, hard-working, and a "man of sacrifice." Daniel elaborates:

We never talked about homosexuality—what is gay or anything like that. That topic would not be broached. Never. Whether you were the parent or the child, you didn't talk about it. It is a hush-hush topic. You may have heard rumors about "so and so," but no one talked about it. My dad, please, back then, ignored it. It is only now, after being in this country for years, he may mention it because of some pop culture reference—but that is rare. But it's the culture, man. It is as if "real men" are not gay because men are the "givers" and not the "receivers." Real men provide for their families—money and otherwise. Real men are defined by their sexual conquests and prowess or how many children [they have]. That is what I was exposed to as a child and as I got older, I would overhear the stories my mom's friends told and began to realize that the men who could not keep their woman satisfied or provide for their family were dogged out! But my dad was a considered a good man and a good role

model—hard-working and always sacrificing for the family. I knew these qualities were ones I aspired to have too. But, I was also a bit of a “playa” too. I had my ladies. What--? They love me, what can I say? [laugh].

On the other hand, some of the women talked about struggling to manage their families’ rigid or “old-fashioned and patriarchal” Caribbean cultural expectations regarding traditional women’s roles of homemaker, while balancing what they considered to be American notions of women’s liberation. These women, like Erica and Natalie (see Table 1), described in intricate detail that neither Caribbean nor American ideas of womanhood fit their lives. Erica stated:

Some of my earliest memories of my grandaunt are of her telling me how to be a demure girl—a good girl. One who keeps her virtue, takes care of home, and who turns a blind eye to a misbehaving husband—unless the affair becomes public or too embarrassing. That’s what these women do in the islands. What’s good for the goose isn’t good for the gander, I suppose. I do think it is important for a woman not to be “running around,” putting shame on her family name, but I also don’t think that hooking up with a bunch of random men is okay either. What does that prove?

Natalie also expressed some dismay regarding the inequality of gender roles:

Of course, there are many more opportunities women have today than there was when I was growing up. Yes, they [parents] tell you to work hard: “You can do and be anything—even president.” But you somehow can’t do as well as your husband, though, or earn more than him. You have to let him be the man and you be the woman. I’ve had to take the back seat to [his] career so that he can pursue his goals, but I think I am okay with doing that because it makes most sense financially. Though it changed the dynamics in the relationship, I don’t feel oppressed because of the choice I made.

Others detailed instances in which being a black person and a woman meant working harder and longer hours than their white colleagues (male or female) in order to prove their economic and intellectual worth, especially when they pursued white-collar professions. Along the same vein, these women also talked about their feelings of guilt and selfishness. They wondered whether those choices were the best options for their marriages and their children, especially at times when their personal relationships were on the brink of divorce or when their children were in trouble. Lisa, for example, recalls:

By my mid-twenties, I knew I needed to make good on my parents' dreams. They worked hard and encountered a lot of hardships to make a better life for my siblings and me. But now I understand that that type of success comes with a price. On TV, you see these high-powered white women that have it all—thinking you can have it too: the nice house, fantastic career, good marriages, and well-adjusted children. But as a black woman, white feminism doesn't speak to my experience. I still have to be the good wife and mother and be able to build the children up to be strong and proud—'cause hiring help can't teach my children why it is important for them to understand their Jamaican and Panamanian immigrant roots but also know my [American] history too. At the same time, husbands need their wives, and children need their mothers.

In this regard, traditional race and gender role expectations from both American and immigrant cultural discourses put pressure on these participants to the point where they felt trapped or confined by these divergent identity practices.

There were also other women participants who sought to reconcile this mismatch by reinterpreting these expectations and reorganizing them into new rituals that fit better within the social context that they lived. An example of this is Michelle's (see Table 1) reflection on her experiences as a dark-skinned (black) Dominican woman from the South Bronx, finding the right balance between Caribbean cultural/

gender traditions and American feminism to define what it means to be a strong and empowered black woman:

My teen years, especially, [were] full of pain and stress. For a long time I thought my mom's and *'buelas'* [grandmother's] ideas were old fashioned and "old world." But now, I've come to appreciate what they've been saying to me all of these years because I have seen some of it come to pass. But I've also had different experiences from them because I was born and educated here, I married a white guy from Ireland and not the lighter-skinned son of a prominent Dominican businessman from Santiago they wanted me to, and now, work as a sixth-grade teacher. I guess I have the vantage point of a three-sided coin, maybe. You know, I have my family's ideas, America's ideas, but importantly my own ideas. Together I have a tool belt of strategies I use to help me navigate through many life situations.

Throughout all of the narratives shared by the participants, the men and women recounted stories demonstrating their engagement and agency in their own narrative construction. Participants defined for themselves exactly what experiences were the most salient or identity-challenging as opposed to readily accepting dominant cultural notions of second-generation assimilation. In this regard, embracing and actively (re)interpreting the complexity of race and ethnic-based life experiences through narrative is important for expressing how individuals think about the self (individual and social group identity) and their role in their communities and in the world.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of the research presented is to demonstrate the usefulness of exploring the stories of second-generation black Caribbean Americans as a way to understand how this group defines, redefines, asserts, and negotiates their racial and ethnic identities. As this research suggests, the middle-class second generation is, in many ways, trapped between the rigidity of racial marginality and the flexibility of cultural/ethnic hybridity. The constrained meanings and rituals of their



parents' generation haunt them even in instances of racial adversity, and as a result, the second generation has used various mechanisms to cope with and overcome the covert racism they face living as "black people in America" while attempting to celebrate aspects of their parents' culture. Occupying a middle-class socioeconomic position also connoted success and achievement for participants, although the vast majority of them described feeling like they were "straddling two worlds" due to the mismatch between the enduring cultural models. For these individuals, immigrant success and opportunity contrasted with evolving racial and economic opportunity structures that constrain them.

For the women, this mismatch was further complicated by gender role expectations that were not the same for the male participants. Many of the women grappled with managing the social and cultural expectations of their parents' generation, especially in regard to their roles as mother, wife, and daughter, and what those roles meant in defining their womanhood in a post-feminist society. Others sought to reconcile this mismatch by reinterpreting these expectations and reorganizing them into new rituals that they feel are a more useful fit in today's the social context.

My presentation of their stories, I hope, provides this second generation a platform to share and also reconstruct what is perceived to be a dislocated experience of marginality and "in-between-ness" into empowering narratives of fluid and negotiable identities. Rather than illustrating the ways in which participants attempted to synthesize their cultural understandings into a unified dominant cultural narrative of being with the American identified or ethnic identified only, excerpts from the second-generation black Caribbean narratives presented here intend to demonstrate how these individuals re-associated their experiences and their own understanding of transnational consciousness and community.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the sociology of American race and immigration literature, the children of first-generation Caribbean immigrants born in the United States are commonly referred to (and often self-identified) as second-generation Caribbean immigrants. Though most laypeople may not refer to this second-generation population as immigrants (as opposed to American-born), this reference is meant to signify the generational link (e.g., the transmission of rituals, teachings, and cultural practices) between the immigrant generation and their children.

<sup>2</sup> According to the U.S. Census 2010 Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance reports, the middle class is defined as households having annual incomes above \$35,000 and below \$100,000 (averaging around \$70,000); earners typically hold two- or four-year college degrees and/or postgraduate degrees and maintain semi-professional and professional occupations. As of the 2011 reports, this segment made up approximately 43 percent of American households. Of the 14.7 million black households in the United States, approximately 38.4 percent are in the middle class. See [www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p60-238.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p60-238.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> According to Ricoeur, “emplotment” is the process that synthesizes lived experience(s) in a narrative (“Life in Quest of Narrative” 21). Events are transformed into episodes that take their place in a unified singular story. Events can appear discordant until they are integrated and made sense of in the story.

<sup>4</sup> According to Robert Merton’s notion of a master status, there is one aspect of an individual’s identity that society will draw on to define them. In the United States, there is a history of using race-based classification systems to relegate those of darker skin or African-like features to lower social levels. Interestingly, one’s position within this racial classification system determines a person’s master status. For members of racial-ethnic groups in the United States, their master status is based on race.

<sup>5</sup> “Transnationalism in Question” by Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald describes transnational or transnationalism as having and maintaining connections to various networks or communities that extend beyond loyalties to any particular place of origin or national group. This notion connotes fluidity of identity, belongingness, and membership that exceed boundaries of nation and state.

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