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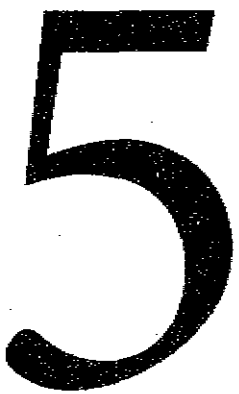
BLACK IDENTITIES

WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANT DREAMS AND AMERICAN REALITIES

RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION
New York

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England

ENCOUNTERING AMERICAN RACE RELATIONS



Comparisons between black Americans and West Indians often focus on the "culture" of West Indians as an explanation for their success. Culture here often means a dedication to hard work and a high value on education, but there are few ethnic groups in America who would not claim those particular cultural values. Can culture really explain any differences in rates of success between West Indians and African Americans? The previous chapter described structural reasons for one particular concrete finding about West Indians—their high labor force participation rate. I showed how social networks eased and facilitated their hiring and how their immigrant status and their different metric for judging a job could contribute to their longevity in the job. These differences between Americans and West Indians are structural in that they do not imply different values on education or work but imply instead different social locations for individuals that lead to different opportunities and actions. The differences described above were also race-neutral; they were differences one would find between any native-born American and immigrant, regardless of color. Yet I also showed that these structural differences were often given stereotypical cultural explanations—West Indians value hard work, black Americans prefer to live off welfare.

In this chapter I turn to a specific cultural comparison between West Indians and African Americans—their interpretations of, and reactions to, racial discrimination. I argue that the West Indian cultural response to black-white race relations helps to foster social mobility for many first-generation immigrants. The cultural reactions to race, discrimination,

and racial hierarchies displayed by the immigrants have two components—the culture associated with being an immigrant and the culture the immigrants bring with them, the latter the long-term result of living with the particular racial structures of the Caribbean.

West Indians have a low expectation of sour interpersonal race relations, and this enables them to have better interpersonal interactions with white Americans than many native African Americans. In addition, their sense of efficacy, coming from a society with a majority of blacks and with many blacks in high positions, leads the immigrants to have high ambitions and expectations for their own success. At the same time, they expect that race will make it harder to rise socioeconomically in the United States because they know America has racial problems and so they are very prepared to battle for their rights. This combination of high ambitions, friendly relations with whites on an interpersonal level, and strong militance in encountering any perceived discrimination leads to some better outcomes in the labor market for West Indians than for black Americans. But cultures, as patterned ways of dealing with the environment, change when the environment changes.[1] The West Indians' notions about race change over time as their beliefs that race will not hold them back come up against a reality in which race is still a potent boundary in American society.

There are three separate components to the West Indians' racial identities and understandings of race—the lack of an oppositional identity, the expectation of what I call structural racism, and the low expectation of what I call interpersonal racism. Each of these will be examined in turn.

THE CULTURE ASSOCIATED WITH BEING AN IMMIGRANT

Although blacks were originally brought to the West Indies involuntarily to work as slaves on sugar plantations, West Indians who emigrate to the United States do so voluntarily. As voluntary immigrants in the United States, West Indians display certain psychological and cultural reactions to American society that are closer to those of other voluntary immigrants than to African Americans who were absorbed into the United States involuntarily. Anthropologist John Ogbu makes a distinction between immigrant "voluntary minorities," who have chosen to move to a society

in order to improve their well-being, and caste-like "involuntary minorities," who were initially brought into the society through slavery, conquest, or colonization. This distinction is very helpful in understanding the reactions to American race relations of West Indian immigrants.[2]

Ogbu argues that the coping responses that different groups develop for dealing with problems of racism and discrimination reflect their histories and social psychologies. Because they use their home country and culture as a frame of reference, voluntary migrants do not react to discrimination and exclusion in the same way as involuntary minorities. In effect they can say to themselves, "Americans might not value my culture but I am from a place where I am valued." Discrimination and prejudice are something they plan to overcome. Immigrants then have a "greater degree of trust for white Americans, for the societal institutions controlled by whites, than do involuntary minorities. Such immigrants acquiesce and rationalize the prejudice and discrimination against them by saying, in effect, that they are strangers in a foreign land [and] have no choice but to tolerate prejudice and discrimination."[3] They develop "immigrant identities" that *differ* from the dominant group's identities but are not necessarily *opposed* to those identities.

Involuntary minorities do not have a homeland with which to compare their current treatment nor to root their identities in. Thus, Ogbu argues, they do not see discrimination against them as a temporary barrier to be overcome. Instead, "[r]ecognizing that they belong to a subordinate, indeed, a disparaged minority, they compare their situation with that of their white American peers. The prejudice against them seems permanent, indeed institutionalized."[4] This understanding of their situation leads the involuntary minorities to conclude that solidarity and challenges to the rules of the dominant society are the only way to improve their situation. Ogbu describes the psychological orientation that develops among involuntary minorities as being "oppositional" in nature.

These "oppositional identities" mean that involuntary minorities come largely to define themselves in their core identities in terms of their opposition to the dominant group. For blacks in America, Ogbu asserts, the very meaning of being black involves *not* being white. A strong value is placed on solidarity and opposition to rules perceived as being against them; when a member of the group is seen as cooperating with the

dominant society's institutions, his or her very identity is called into question. In Ogbu's research the young black student who tries to achieve in school is accused of "acting white."[5]

Because involuntary minorities see the rules of the game as stacked against them and permanent, their folk theory of how to make it in society stresses collective effort and group challenges as the ways to overcome barriers set up by whites. Thus individuals who attempt to assimilate and to achieve as individuals often run into strong pressure not to do so: "Crossing cultural boundaries, behaving in a manner regarded as falling under the white American cultural frames of reference, is threatening to their minority identity and security, but also to their solidarity. Individuals seeking to behave like whites are discouraged by peer group pressures and by affective dissonance."[6] Assimilation is thus doubly threatening to the involuntary migrant: they must adopt some cultural practices, such as language and styles of interaction, that are not only different from what they are used to but are perceived as antithetical to their own culture and language. Christopher Jencks notes this difference between European immigrants and African Americans, both of whom faced discrimination but with different psychological consequences:

> For Europeans who came to America because they were dissatisfied with their homeland, assimilation has often been difficult, but it has not for the most part been intrinsically humiliating. European immigrants come with no animus against America and they had reason to believe that if they learned to act like Americans they would be accepted as such . . . In order to become fully assimilated into white America blacks must to some extent identify with people who have humiliated and oppressed them for three hundred years. Under these circumstances "assimilation" is likely to be extraordinarily difficult.[7]

West Indians are a group Ogbu uses to compare with African Americans to show the difference between involuntary and voluntary minorities. West Indians are described as voluntary immigrants who do not experience the same degree of disillusionment and cultural inversion and oppositional identities as African Americans. But West Indians are also the descendants of slaves. Why is it that their initial incorporation into

their own societies as involuntary migrants does not create an involuntary minority attitude toward whites when they arrive in the United States?

Part of the answer lies in the differences in racial cultures between the two societies that I will describe below, but the other important variable that explains West Indian racial beliefs and practices is their immigrant status. Judging from the responses of the people we interviewed, the movement to the United States seems to provide the immigrants with a "foreign" status, which makes their reactions to discrimination and prejudice more likely to resemble those of other voluntary immigrants in the United States, than to resemble those of black Americans. (It also leads whites to respond differently to the West Indians than to African Americans as long as the whites see the West Indians' master status as "immigrant" rather than "black." See Chapter 4.) If, as Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann argue, ethnicity can be understood in part as a "narrative" we tell ourselves about our history and our world and our place in that world, the act of immigration tends to erase the slave narrative and replace it with an immigrant narrative.[8] That immigrant narrative includes an optimism about the immigrants' life chances in the United States, even though the immigrants are far from naive about the degree of racial discrimination they expect to encounter. This Trinidadian teacher makes this clear:

> You see I'm not American, and I do not see myself as having been deprived by the whites of America. To the contrary, I came here, I was accepted, I was acknowledged for what I knew, and I am in a position now where I am earning a good salary. I do not view myself in the light of black Americans. (Trinidadian female teacher, age 63, in United States ten years)

Even when they experience prejudice firsthand, West Indians who see themselves as voluntary immigrants have the memory of a homeland to take away the sting:

> Q: What were your expectations about whites in the United States?
> A: I knew they would think themselves better than me, but I know as a Jamaican I was accustomed to being a person of self-worth so that wouldn't bother me . . . I have experienced prejudice from

whites, but that is how whites are. (Jamaican female teacher, age 37, in United States ten years)

The immigrants we spoke to all had a very rosy picture of race relations at home, reflecting the "erasure" of the involuntary minority narrative as well as the stark contrast between the race relations they remember and the pervasiveness of race and racial conflict they encounter in the United States. The islands nevertheless have had their share of race problems. Jamaica has long been a source of black power ideas. Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican, developed his ideas of black power and pride during his time in the United States and then brought those ideas back to Jamaica. Barbados has a long history of brutal relations between its small white population and its large black population. Trinidad and Guyana are both countries with sizable East Indian populations. They have both seen bloodshed over their racial divisions in the last thirty years.

However, one would be hard put to find much description of any of these ideologies or problems in the descriptions of their home countries provided by the respondents in this study. For West Indians in New York, race relations at home are seen through rose-colored glasses.[9] If everything the respondents said was taken at face value, the Caribbean would seem the perfect society for peace and harmony between blacks, whites, and other groups.[10]

Q: Did you expect white people to behave a certain way before you came to the United States?

A: Well, to be honest, it's new. In Trinidad—there are white people in Trinidad, but the white people in Trinidad is like they all accept you . . . When I was growing up, we didn't have this prejudiced thing. I never knew what prejudice was. So as far as the way white people were supposed to react, I didn't know. (Trinidadian female supervisor, age 36, in United States nine years)

While the official slogan of the Jamaican government, "out of many, one," attempts to foster an image of multiracial harmony, Jamaica can perhaps be described as the West Indian country with the highest amount of black power ideology and concern with race. This concern with racial oppression has been fueled by growing poverty and unemployment in the

Kingston slums and by the heavy prevalence of tourism on the island, which brings very rich whites into contact with very poor blacks.[11] But among the Jamaicans we interviewed there was little sense of difficult race relations back home. Even this Jamaican worker, whose only reference point for describing race relations at home are black domestic household workers interacting with white employers, describes the interactions and relations in glowing terms:

> Well, because up here, you know, this racial-racist business different from back home, you know. Different from back home. Back home, mostly blacks always work with whites I say, you know. In the residential area you mostly find the black people, they always work the white. Washes them clothes, clean them house, you know. And they always say the white people handle them so good. People always say that, you know. Yeah, sometime, a lady in my house, she used to work with white lady, and she said the white lady handle her like her own color. Yeah, she told me that. But being up here, everybody is so, you know, different. Like certain streets you can't walk on up here 'cause it's white and, you know, not back home. (Jamaican female worker, age 37, in United States three years)

Given the ways in which class and race intersect and define each other in the Caribbean, it is not surprising that there were some class differences in how respondents recalled race in their home countries. The middle-class teachers gave a more nuanced view of race relations at home. They described race relations in the Caribbean far more positively than race relations in the United States but, to a greater degree than the working-class respondents, described the complexities of the intersection of race and class in their home countries:

> Q: What were race relations like in Jamaica?
>
> A: We did not have race, we had class. Yeah, we have class. We have class among black people. The class that we have out there was who was the parents, where do you live? What kind of school did you attend, that kind of thing out there. You could live any four corner of the island if you have the money for a certain area, and even if you're not white, you can live there if you can afford to.

> So there was no area that you cannot live. (Jamaican male teacher, age 41, in United States five years)

Like other voluntary immigrants West Indians are likely to see prejudice and discrimination as more isolated occurrences, and as temporary barriers to be overcome, rather than as permanent, pervasive symptoms of a society that has overarching enmity toward them. A West Indian, we were told repeatedly in the interviews, treats individual whites as individuals and does not react to whites purely on the basis of skin color. But a West Indian also does not put up with "racist" nonsense when it does occur:

> When I came here, I didn't meet too many of them [whites] in the beginning. Very few, you know. But I'm a person who takes everybody—how you present yourself to me, that's how I take you. I don't judge, I don't pre-judge. I don't look at the color and say, oh, white! Maybe he expects this, maybe he expects that. You know? Then, when we start to interact, however you interact with me, that's the way I'm gonna interact with you. So, however you deal with me, that's how I'm gonna deal with you. I have met some who were very nice. I have met some who were awful. The awful ones, I deal with them awful too. And the nice ones, I deal with them nice . . . Just the way you deal with me, that's how I'll deal with you. Black or white. (Trinidadian female supervisor, age 36, in United States nineteen years)

These concerns with "racialism" and with differentiating true racism from imagined racism reflect a particular experience with race that the West Indians have carried with them.

THE CULTURE THE IMMIGRANTS BRING WITH THEM

Orlando Patterson has described the difference in how racial relations are organized in the Caribbean and the United States as a critical difference between a society in which there is racism (the Caribbean) and a chronically racist society (the United States). What is this critical difference? While both societies were founded to a great extent on slavery, the "American slave society was unique in the complexity and sophistication

of the culture of slavery that it developed and in the extraordinary role slavery and the slave culture played in that development."[12] Contrasting these two types of societies, Patterson argues that in many countries where racism exists, such as England, France, or the Caribbean, "many people there, perhaps the majority, believe in the inherent superiority of whites over nonwhite peoples. Yet they are not racist cultures because this ideology is a minor component in their systems of belief; it serves no indispensable cultural or socioeconomic functions and is not a critical element in the way people define themselves physically and socially. Not so in America."[13] The culture of slavery that existed in the United States from the founding until the civil rights movement, and whose legacy currently persists in the very core of American culture, means that black Americans are "the Other" in the social identities of white Americans. White cultural values fundamentally disvalue African Americans. Racism—the belief in the fundamental inferiority of blacks—is a much larger part of the core American culture in a way it could never be in the Caribbean, where the numbers of white people were never great.

So, Patterson argues that a key difference between the Caribbean and the United States is that the latter is "more terrifying in the all-pervasive presence of the white group and white culture, and the crushing sense of racial isolation and despair" that develops.[14] This is a common theme in the interviews we conducted; the immigrants sense something overwhelming about race in the culture of America, something that they believe has affected African Americans in a very fundamental way:

> I'm very disappointed in black Americans because I think they've allowed others to make them feel that they're not important, or it's as if they act the part that has been put on them. They limit themselves because people say that blacks are limited. They limit themselves and they live like that and I don't believe that. (Jamaican female teacher, age 37, in United States ten years)

Ira Reid noted in his 1939 study that the black immigrants he studied all reported that the whites they encountered in the Caribbean did not even come close to matching American whites in their high degree of racial hostility and contempt.[15] That this contempt and hostility take a toll is incontestable; a number of studies document the feelings of rage and

sadness African Americans endure every day because of white behaviors and attitudes.[16] Indeed, Cornell West has called the results for the poorest African Americans of living in such a racialized society "black existential angst," which derives from "the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture. These wounds and scars attack black intelligence, black ability, black beauty, and black character daily in subtle and not so subtle ways . . . The accumulated effect of these wounds and scars produces a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America's will to justice."[17]

The immigrants describe this difference between the two societies as one where Americans, both white and black, seem obsessed with "racialism." Racialism was the word used to refer to a heightened sensitivity to race, a tendency to regard relations between people in terms of race. The overarching concern with race among Americans was shocking to the immigrants when they first arrived. It was so different from what they were used to back home. Mary, a teacher who emigrated from Jamaica in 1981 at age 29, describes her changing sensitivities on the subject:

> You heard about crime but you didn't hear that you come here and you would be bombarded with this racial thing. And even to this day, sometimes, it's difficult to see things from a race perspective. I still see it as people against people. I find that American blacks, they talk about it, they see it in every incident that happens, it has to be race why this happens . . . You become much more sensitive to it because the television and the radio they pick it up, they say don't you see that, don't you see that. And then you start becoming aware that there is something that's going on, you know. (Jamaican female teacher, age 38, in United States nine years)

Many people we spoke with, both working class and middle class, were especially concerned that their children would develop this attitude of racialism:

> Q: Are there any things that you've tried to tell your children as they're growing up about how to be black or how to get along with white people?

A: Well, no, I've never really told them because of black this and black that. Eventually you will start to become racial. At least I feel that. You see, I feel that it doesn't matter the color of your skin. And you know, the minute you will start to look at, oh, he's white, they're black, and this black isn't gonna do this, you know, eventually it becomes you and humbles your thinking and everything. You know, like they would say up here is racial. I've never encountered any and I really don't want to. But you know, how I go about it on a day to day, you meet people, you talk with them. You know, everybody has different feelings. But you know, for me to tell them that you're black, you're this, you're that—no, I don't. (Guyanese female worker, age 38, in United States nine years)

The perception that black Americans are too quick to cry race is intimately tied to the immigrants' long-standing belief that opportunities exist in the United States and that their own black skin has not, and will not, prevent them from taking advantage of those opportunities.[16] It is this belief that racism, while it might exist, can surely be overcome with determination and hard work that propelled the immigrants to move from a majority-black society to the United States in the first place. And there is a strong psychological incentive for the immigrants to believe that American blacks overestimate the role of race in everyday life and in limiting opportunity. After all, if you have moved to a society in which you are now in the minority, and you have done so in order to achieve success, you do not want to believe that your color will limit that success:

We're not saying that there is not racism, we're not saying that there's not prejudices. We're not saying that there are not certain jobs where they put a token black man. We're not saying that. But you don't have to be negative all the time. I just cannot understand because I came here, I didn't have a high school diploma from this country. You understand? But—I mean, I love my job, I'm doing what I like to do . . . My next step after this will be to have my own catering business. And that is what I'm working towards now. You know? So, don't tell me I can't do it. I could do it. [I say to African Americans] why you can't do it and you're right here? (Trinidadian female supervisor, age 36, in United States nineteen years)

The idea that while racial prejudice might keep the group down, it will not stop them from succeeding as individuals reflects a long-standing tradition among West Indian immigrants—they fight individually, not collectively, for their rights.[19] Indeed, scholars who studied earlier waves of immigration described how West Indians often stressed their British ties and their foreign status as ways to combat discrimination.[20] In psychological terms West Indians often deal with the stigmatized nature of the black race in American society through a strategy of "exit" rather than "voice." Black Americans generally perceive little possibility for individuals to succeed by "exiting" the category of black people, and thus tend to develop a collective strategy to give "voice" to their lack of equality. West Indians, especially in the first generation and especially when they first arrive, believe that by evoking their foreign status, working hard, avoiding "racialism," and challenging true racism with loud cries of protest when it does occur they can "exit" from the stigmatized black category.[21]

These beliefs that individual effort can overcome racial barriers do not mean that West Indians deny the existence of racism (a charge that African Americans often make and that the immigrants spend time refuting). Rather, the immigrants argue that they are very vigilant in noticing attitudes or behaviors that might keep them from achieving socioeconomic mobility. The immigrants often see racism on the job and in society, and they think that racism should be challenged. In fact, the foreign-born pride themselves in being more likely to stand up to whites when "real" situations occur. Yet their lack of racialism was often pointed to by the immigrants to explain why they got along better with whites than African Americans. This manager believes that whites are more at ease with him because he does not react to them based on their race:

> I think—I am a Caribbean American. I see what a person is, right? And if I need something from you, I'm gonna ask for it, regardless of who you are. And like, I'm a person. I mean, color and nationality is secondary and I think that most Caribbean people focus on that point of view. And I think this helps people to get along. You know, if you don't have any preconceived notions. I have no problem with

white Americans and I think that from that perspective they treat you differently. In conversations with other black Americans—not all, mind you, some. I seen that some of their basic concepts are so strange, that it keeps them back. You know, their values. (Grenadian male manager, age 42, in United States nine years)

Several respondents consciously tied this difference between West Indians and African Americans to what they perceive as the Americans' preoccupation with the historical experience of slavery. This Jamaican teacher argues that African Americans see slavery in job hierarchies that are merely job hierarchies:

I would think [that West Indians get more opportunities than African Americans in New York] but I don't think it's because of the whites, I think it is because of the blacks. The attitude of the blacks, I see it everyday. And that's—for example, some people will say you are subservient, you are just accepting of everything. It's not a matter of accepting, it's a matter of the work ethic. That a white person is set over you—it's not who is set over you but you came here with a certain work ethic. Somebody is set over you and you do what you are told to do. It's not that you don't have any backbone or that you are subservient or anything, it's just that you are in the workplace and somebody has to be the boss. I think we accept that quicker than American blacks, much more readily than American blacks. American blacks say he's white and he's set over me, that is slavery, and he tells you to do that and it's still the slavery thing continuing. (Jamaican female teacher, age 41, in United States seven years)

Another teacher also pointed out this willingness of West Indians to do jobs that Americans would find degrading because of their ability to separate their sense of self from the job:

To me, Americans still remember and they're really heavy into it, so they don't do certain jobs they wouldn't take either. They don't do it. You know what I'm saying? Most of the maids and stuff you see around here are West Indian people. 'Cause they [black Americans] figure they ain't working in no white person's kitchen. You know 'cause that was a thing of the past. You know they're not thinking

it's money in the pocket. You know they prefer to go on welfare . . . You know you hardly find any American person who would say they'd take a maid job or anything like that. They don't want to do it. You know they feel degraded to be walking out in the park or wherever and they got two white kids—they babysitting. West Indian person will do it. (Guyanese female teacher, age 33, in United States eight years)

Thus the cultural beliefs and practices West Indian immigrants bring to the United States reflect two influences—their status as voluntary immigrants, which leads them to expect hard work and ambition to conquer discrimination, and their experiences in Caribbean society, which lead them to expect racial discrimination but to see it as a relatively contained part of life, not one that suffuses every encounter between black and white. These expectations are severely challenged by the immigrants' experiences in American society.

ENCOUNTERING THE REALITY OF AMERICAN RACE RELATIONS

The expectations that the immigrants have about race relations in the United States do not prepare them well for their experiences here. Most respondents report surprise at the racial situation they encounter; many report deep shock. The immigrants come here expecting to encounter what I call *structural racism*—blocked mobility for blacks in the society and a hierarchy in which whites have political and economic power. When they encounter this kind of racism, the immigrants are able to handle these situations well, mainly by challenging them. For example, they will apply for jobs and housing they feel they deserve, even if they believe whites are trying to prevent their mobility.

But almost everyone we spoke to was unprepared for the degree of interpersonal racism they encountered in the United States—the overarching concern with race in every encounter, the constant role race plays in everyday life, and the subtle experiences that are tinged with racial suspicions and overtones. The immigrants' encounters with each of these forms of American racism will be examined in turn.

Structural Racism

West Indians come to the United States prepared to find racial discrimination. After all, the racial problems of the United States are no secret throughout the world, and most immigrants are following friends and relatives who have sent home much information about what life is like in America after immigration. But when the immigrants imagine the racism they will encounter here, they base those expectations on the race relations they have experienced in the Caribbean. Back home whites and light-skinned blacks were more likely to be in higher socioeconomic positions, and it was very rare to see a white person at the bottom of the socioeconomic status ladder. Thus while race was not *determinative* of socioeconomic position (many blacks were in a high position), it was *highly correlated* with it (most high positions were filled with light-skinned blacks or whites). The immigrants expected blocks to black mobility: while they *could* rise to the top, it would be more difficult because whites were in control and would jealously guard their competitive position.

In descriptions of race relations at home, class distinctions were often tied to color distinctions; respondents recalled that lighter-skinned people commanded wealth, power, and top-level jobs:

> Whites were not existing in the community as such. They were there. White teachers taught in the schools, but they were volunteers from England. You would see American tourists, but what we had was sort of a class consciousness in Jamaica which was also correlated with light skin. Syrians and Chinese and people with light skin got the bank jobs, good jobs. (Jamaican male teacher, age 41, in United States five years)

But even this story was a dynamic one. Past discrimination in favor of light-skinned people meant that control of top jobs and power in these societies was highly correlated with color. However, since independence in the 1960s and the establishment of the merit-based, yet still hierarchical, school system, many dark-skinned islanders had achieved a great deal of social mobility.

When they arrived in the United States, both middle-class and working-class respondents were surprised by the existence of poor whites. Ex-

pecting the United States to be more racist than the Caribbean, they were surprised to find whites in positions where they actually served blacks:

> The class structure really surprised me. Our population is made up of blacks, East Indians who came as indentured laborers, a small percentage of Portuguese, a small percentage of Chinese, very few whites . . . It was the whites who had the key positions. You know, the top positions. And we looked up to them, they were the bosses, they made the decisions. You had to go to them for a job. That was the structure. After independence . . . it started to change and then who did they take? The light-skinned blacks. Those that had the light skin and had the hair and the look . . . So over there, you wouldn't find a white man driving a taxi cab. No way. He wouldn't do anything like that. Not there. Over here, it's common. That's one thing I've been surprised about. Over there, you wouldn't find a white man picking up garbage, being garbage men, no, no no. They had all the important positions, the doctors, the lawyers, the managers. They did not do these menial jobs . . . Here you see white people—they different classes, you have the rich ones and the poor ones, you have the middle-class ones, you have the laborers. You know over there you did not have that. They were only upper class. So that was a surprise. You get in a cab, you expect a white guy to drive you? No. He has a chauffeur. (Guyanese female teacher, age 42, in United States twenty-two years)

Another respondent discusses how she learned once she arrived here that the white tourists she had encountered back home were not worthy of the exalted treatment they had received:

> I can remember when seeing white people there and now I come here, I want to beat up myself because we stop and look at them with so much admiration because they're white. And when I come here I realize that some those that we saw, they just some washed-up white people who just have the fare to come to Jamaica, you know what I mean. They're not elite, you know. They get a fare, a cheap ticket to Jamaica, and they come down there and people run to them like

> everybody is so nice to them . . . People would move out of their way to accommodate them because they're white. Nobody thinking of whether they're rich white or poor white. They're white. (Jamaican female teacher, age 37, in United States seven years)

As much as some people were pleasantly surprised to see poor whites and well-off blacks in the United States, their expectations about structural racism here were mostly confirmed. The preponderance of whites in the United States and their positions of power confronted the immigrants daily:

> As far as I see, it's a white world. We living in a white world, you know, everything is just white around us. You go to get a job, there's a white man to interview you. You know, it's just that world we're living in. No matter where you go there's a white person. (Guyanese male supervisor, age 33, in United States nine years)

The majority of respondents described their postimmigration years as a process of coming to terms with this reality. The immigrants believe that whites are threatened by blacks who try to advance, and thus they try to keep blacks under them in order to protect their socioeconomic control and relative superior position. This suspicion is often confirmed by their experiences on the job:

> Sometimes the white, they feel superior to the Negro regardless of his or her ability. At times you might find a Negro who might be more highly qualified than the white person. And because of the races problem, you find that white person will get the job. It do happen. (Guyanese male worker, age 39, in United States six years)

The expectation of structural racism and the evidence they found for it actually provided a bond for American blacks and West Indians. The theme that whites tried to protect their control of the higher reaches of the socioeconomic structure came through in our interviews with both native-born and immigrant blacks:

> I think that white people think that they always have to be the boss over everything. They think that—that was just the way they was brought up, that we aren't better than the whites. We have no blacks

> teaching in school—like they think that they always have to be the boss of us. That's the bottom line, that they have to be the ruler. They have to be on top. (Black American female worker, age 59)

The middle-class teachers and the food-service workers sounded very similar when they described their perceptions of structural racism in the United States. Even immigrants who were highly critical of African Americans for being too "racial" shared the perceptions of their African-American coworkers that race affected mobility in the workplace. For instance, some immigrants described blocked mobility for black people on the job and the lengths to which whites would go to find a white person for a job when a qualified black was already on-site:

> After I got my master's degree I went to the banks to try to get a job. But you know they would rather choose the young white heir. Even if they have to bring them over from the Midwest, and that's what's happening in New York City. Somebody's grandfather, uncle, or godfather, somewhere they live in Texas and they come right at the mid-management level and they get the jobs. (Guyanese female teacher, age 48, in United States twenty years)

The similarities in both foreign-born and native-born views of racism in the structure of work relations in both the public schools and American Food are striking in comparison with the views of their white coworkers. The whites describe their workplaces as fair and just meritocracies. While the white managers believed charges of racism at American Food were unfounded, there was a widespread belief among the black immigrants and the black Americans that mobility beyond a certain point within the company was blocked for people with black skin, regardless of nativity. And this shared understanding of blocked social mobility due to pure discrimination based on race alone, not culture, provided the opportunity for West Indians and African Americans to go to bat for each other and to see themselves as having common goals and experiences.

At American Food supervisors were especially likely to describe blocked mobility. The comparatively large numbers of black supervisors (all were black) compared to black managers (only three out of twenty were black) testified to the difficulty of moving from the ranks of workers

(including supervisors) to management. The supervisors' most common complaint was that while the company often boasted of its internal labor market and worker mobility, the company was likely to "bring someone in from the outside" when there was a management vacancy:

> There's people working here for like excessive amount of years, okay, and they happen to be black. And a white person will come in here and the next thing you know, they're making "X" amount of money more than that person. There's a guy right here right now, he's white, he used to be in purchasing—he used to buy the foodstuffs . . . Now he's been now promoted to manager. He was just with the company for like two years. He's one of the managers. You got people here for like five, seven years. They didn't even ask you if you wanted to apply for it. And this guy have no experience whatsoever, you know, with food, because he just came off the streets, wherever he came from, he happened to know somebody here that hired him downstairs as a purchasing clerk, right? And then he happened to know the executive chef, they were friends, 'cause she's white too, they hang out together. So she just give him a push. Which I think was totally wrong in front of everybody. I was made to understand, this is your boss. Now I can't figure it out. How could he be my boss if he can't even tell me, he can't even explain to me what is a tomato or a cauliflower? There's nothing that he can tell me that I can gain from. (Guyanese male supervisor, age 33, in United States nine years)

Like the immigrants, most American black workers saw systematic racism and discrimination on the job, and they had numerous personal experiences of missed promotions and opportunities owing to their race:

> I had a manager who was prejudiced against me. Harassing me based on my color. I had plenty of chances for a promotion. He denied it. It was left up to him. But he denied it. There was two black ladies working in the office and one Spanish. And there's one more opening. He does not want another black lady in the office. I was due for a vacation, and I said when I come back there will a white woman in that position. Sure enough, when I came back, there was a white woman in the position. (Black American female worker, age 27)

Yet the whites at American Food had very different interpretations. None of them admitted to preferential hiring or promotions for whites over blacks, and some of the whites we spoke to at American Food actually thought that blacks were getting positions at the expense of whites:

> I think there are more opportunities here if you are not white. Because they do push them [blacks] more. I have worked for American Food for ten years, and I think they [blacks], you know, get more today. (White female supervisor, age 50)

Even though all of the whites in the organization held positions as supervisors or managers, whites thought that the company was practicing "reverse discrimination." The whites we interviewed at American Food were all opposed to affirmative action because they believed that it unfairly gave advantages to blacks at the expense of people like themselves:

> When I graduated from college, AT&T had just signed a consent decree with the federal government saying that they would integrate the workplace, and everybody else started. Therefore the white Irish American, say, if I had the ability to work for New York Telephone, chances of me getting a job when I graduated from college in 1971 was slim to none. 'Cause that's when this was signed. (White male manager, age 42)

The white teachers also perceived the hierarchy of the school differently than the African-American and Caribbean teachers. Many of them also thought "the system" was leaning over backwards to accommodate blacks, and none of them thought that special perks or promotions were withheld more often from blacks than from whites.

The achievement ideology of the West Indians prepares them to battle to succeed in the United States. They expect that it will be more difficult for blacks than for whites because they know that whites have more economic and political power than blacks. The immigrants conclude that whites will try to maintain that power and will resist attempts by blacks to enter the higher reaches of society. This is in keeping with the immigrants' understanding and experience of discrimination back home. Their expectations match their experiences, and their interpretations of those experi-

ences match the interpretations of their African-American coworkers and are at odds with the interpretations of their white American coworkers.

While our respondents might have been surprised or disgusted at the extent of structural racism, it fit in with their worldview, and they felt prepared to handle it. Indeed, some people were pleasantly surprised when they learned that whites could sometimes be found in low-level jobs and blacks sometimes in high-level jobs. For some people the degree of structural racism was not even as bad as they had expected. The immigrants were deeply shocked, however, when they encountered the other component of American race relations—interpersonal racism.

Interpersonal Racism

The *interpersonal* racism that the immigrants experience comes in two forms—old-fashioned racism and subtle racism. Old-fashioned racism consists of blatant acts of discrimination and prejudice such as physical attacks or threats, insults on the street, refusals of housing or employment specifically for racial reasons, and hassles or more frightening intimidation by the police. The stories of blatant discrimination told by the immigrants might very well shock Americans who believe that Jim Crow-style racism has been completely eradicated in 1990s America. But the immigrants related episodes of overt racism in housing:

A: I had applied to get a condo—condominium—and I was told by this lady that they not going to take any niggers in this apartment.
Q: She said that to your face?
A: Yes. That turned me off right away. I said, well, I didn't, you know, I'm not going to give up, but still, same time I feel bad to say well O.K., I want to go into a nice decent area and the response that you get is that. (Guyanese female worker, age 29, in United States nine years)

In employment:

Q: Have you ever been discriminated against for being a black person?
A: Oh yeah! One time I went to this store, downtown Brooklyn, to get a job and the day before I went into this store and I talked to

one of the girls and she said that they needed girls. So I got up early in the morning, dressed, had all my stuff ready and I went, 'cause I really wanted the job. And even before the store opened, I was standing outside and I waited there to meet her. So then she showed me the boss, it was a white guy. She said that I came to interview for a job. And he watched me, he watched me really bad. He just look at me and didn't say good morning or nothing and he just—so I kinda got scared. I said, but I'm gonna go in there and get a job. So I went in and I sit down, I talk, and show him the application and everything. And he said we don't have any openings. So I said, I was here yesterday and they showed me that they had a sign up that they wanted help. He said that the sign came down yesterday evening because we got girls. So I say, O.K., I'll try somewhere else. But please, keep me in mind. So I left and I went back about a week after and I went upstairs and they had two new girls, but they were white girls. My friend told me, you didn't get your job but he hired two girls after. I said, he told me he was full. He was filled up. She said, no, those two girls over there were hired the day after you. So I went back to him because I'm that type of person. I said, why did you tell me that you didn't want me because you were full and you hired girls the next day? He said, "Who told you I hired the girls the next day?" I say, well it don't matter. When I came here you didn't have those girls. How come you have those two girls? And he was angry, he was so mad. He wanted me to get out of his store. You know? And I just look around and I say, I know why you didn't hire me, but it's not a problem to me, it's a problem to you. And I just walked off and left him there, you know? Because I felt so stupid because I've never been treated like that before and I finally was.

Q: Now would that kind of thing happen in Trinidad, do you think?

A: Not really, no. Because I worked in Trinidad and we have white folks down there. But they don't even look at you no how. You come for a job and there is an opening, they hire you and you work. And that's it. And that's why it was so strange to me to see how it's so—separate whites or separate, I used to be always asking, why? What's the big deal about this? Back home everybody

just live together, do whatever, it never was. You wouldn't even realize you was a black person because you weren't even worrying about it. But when I came here, I said, this is an issue here? Why it's such an issue, you know? This is what I have to deal with if I'm going to live here? You know.

Q: That must have been upsetting.

A: Surely it is, because you not custom of it. I was not accustomed because you never used to look at it. To come here now and separate it—it's so stupid, you know, why you see this person because of the color of their skin, you know. It was kind of upsetting but then when I applied for other jobs, I realized that was the same thing happening over and over. It was—you can stop and see clearer and then say, oh, maybe this is how it is. (Trinidadian female worker, age 30, in United States ten years)

In police beatings of the Rodney King variety:

Q: Have you ever experienced any discrimination since you came here to the United States?

A: Oh yeah, when it was? In October. Yeah, we was going to this party, right? And we was passing down Empire Boulevard coming from Church Avenue—Ocean Avenue there from by Prospect Park, by Burger King here, they had this black guy and his girlfriend in the Burger King driveway and these two cops was beating him. You know? And we was in this cab and this cab driver stopped and we was saying "no, no, no," you know? And they kept on beating him and his girlfriend wasn't saying one thing. And you know, it was sad. It was sad. I mean it was about two or three of them, and then the next cop car came, you know I find they shouldn't have beaten him because he wasn't fighting them or anything. I never know what happened to him after that. But you know, you don't want to get in trouble so you just, just whisper your words. (Trinidadian female worker, age 29, in United States thirteen years)

On public transportation:

I board the subway going to Bay Park, out in Bay Ridge. And I know this is a discrimination area. Because I was told before I went there.

> And I went on the train and the train was empty, almost empty seats was there for people to sit. And I went and I sit beside this man. He was a white. And he look at me and he say, what you fucking bitch doing here? You know, like that. I said, excuse me, this is a public place and I didn't come to your house and if you try to mess with me, I think you're messing with the wrong crowd. And he, you know, he look at me like this. So I just get up, I said, I don't want to get in trouble for you. Honestly. I just get up because I would slap his ass out. That for sure, oh yeah. I certainly would. I don't play around. So now I always—when I go on the train, I look where I stand. Now we coming to, where I took the train, this is DeKalb, to Cortlandt, and there is a lot of people coming from that same place which is racism. So when they come up to our area, which is practically black, they don't carry on those things. (Jamaican female worker, age 34, in United States fourteen years)

And in the streets:

> Well I was reading, you know, and listening to the news before I came here, and I always know that that was a major problem here in America. Since I'm here, I have encountered a few racial. Because, like it was three years back, it was Christmas Eve night and I was standing downstairs trying to catch a cab and there was this—you know, I was standing there for like thirty-five minutes and each cab that pulls up, you know, would be a white driver, and they would stop and they would slow down, and as soon as they would see me they would just drive off. I was standing there with this bag of gifts. And this white guy came up, he was waiting on a cab too. And he said to me when the cab stopped, he said to me, why don't you go ahead? So I got into the cab and the guy said, no, I'm not taking you. I said, why? I was here before this guy. This guy was nice enough to tell me to go ahead. He drove off. With the bag outside, my feet outside the cab and everything, and I said, boy, this is crazy. And another guy stopped. He did the same thing. He just wanted to pick the white guy up. I said, well, you know, I heard about this, but I never really expected it. (Guyanese male supervisor, age 33, in United States nine years)

These incidents are similar in several ways. Note that each story concludes on a note of surprise that such a thing could happen, and each person relates how he or she was changed by the experience. People who would never look for a "racial" angle now think twice before they accept that a job has been filled or that a cab doesn't stop, or before they venture into a white neighborhood or sit next to a stranger on a subway. There is nothing subtle or open to other explanations about these experiences. They stem from racial prejudice, and the whites who perpetrate these acts are up-front about their disdain for all blacks, including the foreign-born. Any immigrant who had lived in the United States for anything but a short period of time reported having experiences like these. The reactions that appear over and over again in descriptions of these encounters are surprise and shock. Unlike blocked mobility at work, which the immigrants anticipated, these blatant acts of discrimination and raw interpersonal attacks are disturbing because they are so unexpected.

The other type of racism that people experience is the more subtle, modern kind where the perpetrator can deny any racial animosity and claim their behavior is due to other considerations. These subtle experiences often hurt as much or more—the daily hassles, indignities, and "bad vibes" that black people experience constantly in interactions with whites. These include being followed in stores because clerks suspect one might shoplift, whites moving to the other side of the street and clutching their handbags when one passes by, taxis refusing to stop, store clerks who avoid putting money in one's hand because they do not want to touch black skin, or security guards demanding one's identification though they allow coworkers to walk by unchallenged. Subtle racism also includes acts of omission as well as commission—never receiving invitations to coworkers' homes, enjoying friendly treatment from people during telephone exchanges whose attitude turns very cold when they meet one in person, or professors in graduate school acting surprised when one's work is excellent. Both of these types of discrimination and prejudice affect the immigrants profoundly—all the more so because they never expected or imagined how much of it would happen to them personally.

While working-class and middle-class blacks experience both forms of interpersonal racism, the middle class is more likely to experience subtle racism, and the working class is more likely to experience the more direct

old-fashioned racism. The working-class immigrants would describe traveling the subways where people would yell at them to stay out of their neighborhoods; the middle-class respondents would speak of trying to get cabs that refused to stop. Both types of incident are due to the race of the victim, yet in the case of the taxicabs, race is not the only possible explanation.

Many of the stories the middle-class immigrants told us about discrimination involved people who refused to believe they could be middle class—for instance, assumptions by sales clerks that they could not afford certain merchandise:

A: I have had the experience of going to buy something that was, let's say, a high-priced something. You know? And it was like, don't look at this one, because this one is so much and so much. Look at this one, which was less.

Q: So they tried to steer you to something else?

A: Cheaper. You know, because you're black. You can't afford this. To me, the implication was, you can't afford it. You're black. You have to look at this. Or I've had instances where I've walked into some place, and somebody is walking up from down behind me. And I have to turn around and tell them, look, I didn't come into here to pick up the store and walk out with it. I really honestly think that they think that we are all a bunch of drug addicts, shiftless, lazy. (Trinidadian female supervisor, age 36, in United States nineteen years)

This female supervisor is experiencing what many middle-class American blacks have experienced—the stereotype that all black Americans are poor. The idea that her class status, which affords her the wherewithal to buy a high-priced computer or car, does not outweigh or modify her race status seems particularly upsetting to her. This vulnerability to interpersonal racism is particularly hard on middle-class immigrants. At home in the Caribbean, money did "whiten" to some degree and acted as a shield against the interpersonal racism that existed there.[22] The teachers felt acutely that they had enjoyed a certain prestige in the community back home, which they did not have here because the same amount of respect

was not accorded to teachers and because race was such an overwhelming presence in American life:

> It's different [than the United States] down in Jamaica, but as I told you, in Jamaica it's social class. And there was a way out of it, but it seems in America it does not matter how much money you have or how much education you have, race is still going to be an issue. In Jamaica if you were very black, very dark-skinned, you could always get a good education and gain the respect and adoration of everybody. That was it, nobody would ever again look at you or the color of your skin to ask where you came from, were you a farmer's daughter or anything. No, that would go once you got the education. And the education and social class. But it's not like that here. (Jamaican female teacher, age 41, in United States seven years)

Many teachers were shocked by their experiences in graduate school once they realized that their professors did not expect them to do well academically because they were black. Most had received their undergraduate degrees at the University of the West Indies, where the vast majority of the students were black and the professors did not differentiate among students by race. This teacher describes an incident where she had to question whether race was responsible for the behavior of the professor she encountered:

> The professor was white and the class was mixed, it was like half-black, half-white. And I must have been in the front, I used to participate a lot. I don't know why I took it for granted that he knew my name. The day we were doing the final exam and he was handing out the midterm paper and he handed me my paper. Obviously, he knew me, he just brought it over to me. If he didn't know my name, he should ask me. He brought it and I walked out. When I got to my car, checked the paper out, it was a C. And when I looked at it, it wasn't my name. So when I brought it back, I said to myself, why couldn't he mistake my face for an A? Is it that my face looked like a C? Would he have given a wrong name to someone else? There's not enough to say it's prejudiced, right? These are some of the things because I said, "I'm black, and there's no doubt about that." But

maybe he could have mistaken me for a white A and not given me a C. So I took it back to him and I said, if you didn't know my name, you should have asked me. When I got my paper back, I got an A. (Jamaican female teacher, age 37, in United States seven years)

Experiencing this discrimination begins to change the immigrants' behavior, as this teacher describes:

I had an English class and I had written a paper, and I had done something on children's writing because that's what I like, and the professor read it and he said, was this adapted? I was so upset. I said, well excuse me, this is mine and it's an original. Can you find a duplicate? And he's like "Oh, I didn't mean it that way," but I said that's what you implied. That particular class, I was the only black in it. And I got the impression like you're black and you're not supposed to know how to write, you're not supposed to know how to speak, you know . . . Sometimes you feel as if you are, not a spy, but like you don't belong here. This is our territory, you have no business in this territory. Certain fields, you're black and you count the number in the class with your fingers, and it's why are you here? You are invading. That's the feeling I get sometimes. Because sometimes that can really interfere, you know you're not comfortable, you're not sure you want to answer, you're not sure if you want to say something. (Guyanese female teacher, age 34, in United States nine years)

When immigrants notice discrimination in one area of their lives, they begin to see the subtle racism that exists in other areas:

I have felt it [prejudice]. Like the lecturers at City, they say, "oh, you write so well," or they meet you and they say, "oh you speak so well." Now I don't understand why they should single me out and say I speak so well. It's like it's not normal for that color skin to speak well. And because you have become sensitive to this thing now, you sort of sense it, you know. And at the school where I teach, sometimes you wonder whether it's because you are black that certain things are withheld from you; they [whites] are keeping all the little extra jobs in the school. They know about it, they put up an ad over

the time clock, and then you asked if it's been filled or something like that because they had picked out who was to do it already. My district is white and they do discriminate against blacks . . . I often wonder too about some ladies I work with that I often talk to, we are always together. I can get a lift home if I don't have my car, and that sort of thing. And yet they would never like invite you. They're going home for lunch, they're going to have lunch on their back porch and they will not invite you. And you start thinking to yourself, how genuine are these people? What do they think you are going to do if you come to their house? (Jamaican female teacher, age 41, in United States seven years)

In addition to specific incidents, both blatant and subtle, that convince the immigrants to be wary of whites, many respondents reported that they began to pick up "bad vibes" coming from whites—a general attitude of disgust and disdain that is unspoken, yet undeniably about race:

A: White people look at Negroes as though, you know, they don't exist. They think very little of you. It's like you don't have intelligence. And they always try to put you down in that kind of way.
Q: Do you think white people know the difference between Caribbean Negroes and African-American Negroes?
A: No, I think they classify them all as the same. They don't really want to know, you know. (Guyanese male supervisor, age 33, in United States nine years)

The black Americans had the same litany of bad experiences based on race that the middle-class immigrants described, including professors doubting their good performances in university, promotions going to less qualified whites, and treatment akin to a poor or criminal person based on the color of their skin. The teachers saw a great deal of entrenched racism in the schools where they worked; many were concerned that white teachers had low expectations of their black students.

Since a majority of the black American teachers we interviewed were originally from the South, many of them compared race relations in present-day New York with what they remembered from the South. Unlike the immigrants, they did not describe their original home as a place

where they experienced no racism—in fact, many told very moving stories about their experiences with Jim Crow racism as young children. Yet several of the teachers from the South suggested that it was easier to be black in the South than in the North because they had attended segregated schools and lived their lives in such a way that they rarely encountered whites. This was not possible in New York, especially as a middle-class person who worked with whites. This nostalgia for the "power" and "freedom" that segregation brought, especially in the schools, has recently been expressed by a number of black writers.[23] The parallels are strong between the immigrants' discussions of the freedoms they felt coming from the majority-black West Indies and the southern blacks' remembrances of their hometowns.

Interpersonal racism begins to undermine the immigrants' belief that they can tell the difference between incidents that are "racial" in nature and those that are not. Over time, the openness and willingness to respond to whites as "individuals" erode. The suspicion that any individual white might treat one badly because of skin color begins to shape every encounter between black and white. Interpersonal racism ultimately undermines the ability of blacks and whites to ever "forget race." The ghosts of past bad encounters influence current encounters. The immigrants learn to expect race to permeate every potential encounter with a white American.

The experiences of Ginny, a 29-year-old Guyanese cafeteria cashier, and Charissa, a 41-year-old Jamaican teacher, illustrate the ways in which interpersonal racism and the expectation of interpersonal racism begin to change the immigrants' overall experience of America and their modes of interacting with whites. Ginny, like most other cafeteria workers, did not have very many areas of her life where she interacted with whites. Aside from work and some fleeting encounters with whites in public arenas such as shops, trains, parks, beaches, and the like, most of her life was spent with other black people. Her friends, her neighbors, and many of her coworkers were either American or Caribbean blacks. Because of the high degree of racial segregation in housing and the ripple effects of that segregation on other institutions such as schools, churches, and parks, there are few areas other than work in which working-class immigrants have sustained contact with whites. Yet Ginny enjoyed very good relations with the whites she encountered on the job. This consisted of the back-

and-forth banter she would have with the white office workers and executives who came through her line with their lunch every day. Her experiences had generally been quite positive and she had grown to know many of her regular customers enough to ask about their vacations and their families, and they would ask in return about her family and her vacations. Some customers even asked a number of questions about what Guyana was like and why she had emigrated. Yet Ginny reports that her generally positive encounters with whites left her unprepared and shocked for the negative encounter she had recently endured:

> The white people that come to my line, you know, they will greet me. They say, hello, morning, good afternoon . . . But one day this guy, he came in my line and I was asking him what he have on his tray 'cause I couldn't see what he have, and he said, "You can't see what I have on my tray? If you don't understand our language, why don't you go back to your country and I'm sick and tired of you black niggers—all you black people down here—all you niggers down here." That's what he said. And I went to get the manager and, you know, they told me the next time that he come back they going to talk to him. But he came like a lot of times and they never come and talk to him. And he was saying it loud and clear, and the other whites that was behind him they was surprised to see how this man was going on. But—he acts like he has a problem or something, I don't know. But it was terrible that he said that, you know. I feel bad because when one person mess up with you, well everybody's the same thing. (Guyanese female worker, age 29, in United States nine years)

Of course, on a cafeteria line all service people will probably experience rude behavior and lack of respect from customers. But for Ginny and all of the other workers who witnessed this incident, the use of the term "nigger" and the racism it laid bare will affect future interpersonal encounters with whites. While most people getting their lunch on this cafeteria line are not likely to ever call anyone a nigger, that one encounter, as this worker clearly understands, will "color" her expectations and experiences with every white customer who approaches her cash register. Indeed, the story of how black immigrants come to terms with American

racism really is more about how they see *interpersonal* racism rather than *structural* racism. And this involves developing a "sixth sense" that picks up on whites' unspoken disdain, that notices the ways in which whites look at you. The immigrants have to learn for the first time that race in the United States is not just about intergroup conflict over societal rewards, which is what they had expected, but that many whites simply do not see a black person as a human being.

Charissa also had an experience that changed her expectations about race and its effects on her. While Ginny's experience was clear-cut and undeniably about race, Charissa's was more opaque and open to interpretation. But it also changed her expectations about interactions with whites. For most of her interview Charissa was insistent that she did not want to become "racial" in the United States, and she is concerned that her teenage children seem overly focused on racial slights. She feels that black Americans are too consumed by their race:

> I can't help them [African Americans] because they're so wrapped up in racism, and they act it out so often, they interpret it as such so often that sometimes they are not even approachable. If they're going to teach anything and it's not black, black, all black, they are not satisfied, you know. If they're going to teach poetry and it's not all written by blacks—it's strange that they think it should be so. Yes, we did black authors and black writers but certainly we did a lot of British. You know for us that's not new. Sometimes I feel sorry for them, but you find that you just can't change their attitude because they just tell you that you don't understand. You weren't here to feel what we felt. (Jamaican female teacher, age 41, in United States seven years)

Yet she had an experience that made her much more receptive to the advice of her African-American friends. She was attending graduate school to get a master's in education, and she had to take the national teachers test to keep her position in the city schools. The forms for the test included a question on race. The first time she took the test she answered the race question by stating that she was black, and she was certain she had done very well on the test. But when she got the results, she learned that she had failed the test. An African-American friend from one of her

graduate classes told her that the test was rigged and that a certain number of blacks who took the test were purposefully failed so whites could pass at a higher number. Charissa was very skeptical about this assertion at first, but the second time she took the test, she left the race question blank and she passed the test. Since that time she has never put her race on any form that asks for it; she believes that many forms require information about race so that blacks can be uncovered and discriminated against.

THE COMFORT FACTOR

In his autobiography Malcolm X wrote about why the white man hated the Negro: "Do you know why the white man really hates you? It's because every time he sees your face, he sees a mirror of his crime—and his guilty conscience can't bear to face it."[24] West Indian blacks provide a black face for whites to look into without seeing the sorry history of American race relations mirrored back. This puts whites at ease, and a cycle of expectations is created. West Indians don't expect strained relations with whites, and whites don't expect strained relations with West Indians. These expectations are often met, and thus race relations at an interpersonal level are smoother for whites and West Indian blacks than they are for whites and American blacks.

I have noted in Chapter 4 that the whites who worked at American Food, most of whom are the descendants of European immigrants, tended to see the immigrants as sharing an "immigrant" identity with them. Yet the basis for the relative warmth all of these whites feel toward West Indians as opposed to African Americans goes beyond their shared immigration histories. Whites sense the lack of opposition in West Indians to their whiteness and report having far friendlier experiences with foreign-born blacks than with American blacks. For instance, this white manager senses exactly the difference that the West Indians describe in how they relate to her as a person who is in authority over them:

> Sometimes I feel that people who come from the islands are more appreciative of their jobs. They consider themselves fortunate. And sometimes I feel that the assistants that come from the South feel that you owe it to them to keep them on when you have some

problems. The island people are a little more open to white people than the southern blacks who question authority more. And I don't know how to say it—the West Indians kind of accept the fact that even though you are white, it is not *because* you are white that you are dictating to them, but because you are the person in authority. (White female manager, age 32)

In a widely quoted popular article on relations among American whites, American blacks, and recent immigrants in *The Atlantic Monthly*, journalist Jack Miles argues that whites prefer to be with and deal with immigrants rather than American blacks. Speaking about race relations in Los Angeles, Miles notes that for Anglos, "Latinos, even when they are foreign, seem native and safe, while blacks, who are native, seem foreign and dangerous."[25] Miles describes this as the "comfort factor" and asserts that whites are more comfortable with black immigrants as well. He notes that when he was in college, he had a Nigerian roommate whom he felt immediately comfortable with. The ease of his friendship with his Nigerian roommate showed him how deep an estrangement separated him from African Americans.[26]

Why did he feel such discomfort with black Americans? He notes that in the 1960s when he was spending a great deal of time with American black people, he sensed how they were approaching their relationship with him: "In the end I felt that even with me they were prepared at every moment, at every single moment, for the worst, braced as it were, for a blow. This is what slavery has done to us as a people, and I can scarcely think of it without tears."[27] The "comfort factor" that whites felt toward West Indians and their "discomfort" with black Americans came through clearly in the interviews. A key difference that was cited over and over by the whites interviewed was the sense of entitlement they detected among American blacks:

Q: What are the differences [between American blacks and West Indians] that you see?

A: From a working standpoint—work ethic? The willingness to work for a living—among some, as compared to American blacks. The willingness to be helpful. The chip isn't on the shoulder that you may get from an American black because they're

black, and then a Jamaican person, you can go up to them—I'm willing to treat them same as me. He's no better than me, I'm no better than him. And I get that treatment all the time. And I treat that way.

Q: Where do you think this difference comes from?

A: Uh, their own cultures. I think—this is terrible but I think American blacks sometimes think that they're owed something instead of working for it. (White male manager, age 42)

The managers' sense that American blacks have a chip on their shoulder is consciously related to the historical experience of black-white racial conflict in the United States:

This is not the whole group, this is a portion of the group, they [American blacks] tend to have a chip on their shoulder about the same thing. Tend to feel that the debt has not been paid by society and feel that they should get special treatment and take advantage of the system. Very often I've had people leave here because they can collect more money on welfare. Stay home and collect welfare. You know, those kinds of things. (White female manager, age 30)

Whites pointed to a difference between American blacks and foreign-born blacks in terms of the amount of anger and sense of entitlement they displayed. For instance, this white teacher was asked to describe what black Americans are like:

A: I think there's an evolving African-American character as differentiated from a black character. I think that has been around forever. I think that if it's going to be anything, if I could pick a word, I would say "angry."

Q: Really?

A: Yeah, because I think that there's this sense of "I want what I deserve" happening. (White female teacher, age 26)

In contrast, the immigrants are described by the whites as being willing to work within the system, as not taking advantage of the system, as not feeling that they are owed something, and as not being angry and blaming

whites for historical wrongs. So most whites reported that they felt more comfortable with foreign-born blacks than with American-born blacks:

Q: What about West Indians, or people from the islands? What characteristics come to mind when you think of West Indians?

A: Um, from my experience, I think for the most part, they're extremely friendly people. I mean, it just seems like they're friendly. They'll say hello to you, they smile, they wave. (White male manager, age 34)

At the same time, a significant number of the white managers describe the foreign-born as being very outspoken, very aware of race, and very likely to be blunt about what they want. Yet this did not seem to dampen relations between whites and West Indians in the same way that it dampened relations between African Americans and whites:

Q: Do you see ethnic differences between people from the islands and American blacks? Do you notice any distinctions there?

A: American blacks probably feel they, they probably feel that they wish—give more to them. You know what I'm saying? I don't know how to explain it. Whereas island blacks who come over, they're immigrant, they may not have such a good life where they are so they gonna try to strive to better themselves, and I think there's a lot of American blacks out there who feel we owe them. And enough is enough already. You know, this is something that happened to their ancestors, not now. I mean, we've done so much for the black people in America now that it's time that they got off their butts.

Q: Do you think the immigrant blacks will end up doing better economically than the American blacks?

A: Sure. That's because I think they strive for it more. I think they've had, they—I don't think they feel we owe them a living. You know?

Q: But you get that sense from American blacks?

A: I get that sense, oh yeah. Yeah. (White female manager, age 33)

It is not surprising that the immigrants develop the perceptions about white attitudes that I have just described. Race relations have changed enough in American society over the last few decades so that few whites

admit to being prejudiced against all blacks and discriminating against them. Yet many of the whites we interviewed for this project were surprisingly open about their negative feelings toward black people.

We spoke to the white coworkers of the immigrants to see how they understood race relations as well as the differences they saw between West Indians and black Americans. Four themes emerged in our discussions with the whites. First, most whites went out of their way to try to convince the interviewers and themselves that they were not racists. Second, the vast majority of the whites felt very uncomfortable with blacks, made negative judgments about black people as a whole, and evaluated their employees and coworkers by the color of their skin all of the time. A smaller minority was blatantly racist and expressed strong resentment about what they perceived as the growing powers of black Americans. Third, most whites did not understand the amount and severity of interpersonal racism blacks endured. Those who did begin to understand those experiences were shocked by it. Finally, given the complexities of American race relations, many whites had a hard time sorting out when race was determining differences they saw between individuals and when race was not a factor.

Most people did not like to think of themselves as prejudiced. Yet a relatively nonthreatening question about good qualities of black Americans was surprisingly difficult for many respondents:

> Q: What are the traits of black Americans that you think are the best?
> A: Um, this is a real hard question for me. Again, certain blacks, if you—the sense of family is very strong among, you know, certain blacks, but unfortunately, there are just too many black people that don't know who their parents are or there's a lot of, you know, unwed mothers and this and that . . . Oh, God. This is the hardest question you've asked. Can you repeat it one more time? Let me think about this one more time. The characteristics that I . . . (White male manager, age 34)

Others were less embarrassed or reticent about expressing negative impressions in response to a similar question:

> I don't have a positive impression of them. I think everybody with a little self-control and a little self-discipline, and I mean a little, can

do a lot better for themselves. And it means, forget the personalizing. I just mean, come to work every day and stuff like that. (White male manager, age 42)

Most white respondents were much more able to tap into their negative impressions of black people, especially "underclass" blacks whom they were highly critical of. These opinions were not just based on disinterested observation. There was a direct sense among many of the whites that they personally were being taken advantage of and threatened by the black population. One woman's resentment of blacks hinges on her assessment that they do not work hard (despite the long-term, hard-working employees she manages) and is directly related to her belief that there is much competition for resources:

Even just observing them and watching them or driving through like, downtown Jersey City, and you see all these people, I mean, it's a shame that you have to be terrified going through some sections, you know? I mean you listen to the news reports, it's always blacks, it's always blacks, it's always blacks, you know? You want to go out and like, shake them, wake them up. Hey guys, go get a job. Don't stand on the street corner drinking a bottle. You know, it's like go out and do something for yourself, better yourself because the opportunities are there—but you know what? They find the easy way out. I have somebody working for me who—American black—who got a job here, and quit four months later because she was collecting more money on welfare then she was getting here. I think our government has lost complete control over the welfare system, over social security, and by the time I'm able to retire, there ain't gonna be anything there for me. You know, I can't get aid. I'm in the minority now. I can't get school help. It's not fair, it's not fair. I couldn't get aid in school, I couldn't get financial aid for school. My father either made too much or I was white. And that is true today. It's still true today. I don't resent it but I don't think it's fair either. You know, because we're handing it to them. We're saying, we're sorry, here you go. You know? Well hey! What about me over here? You know? How can you not be prejudiced or bigoted towards American blacks because they don't do anything. They don't show that they deserve it. I mean if this girl can make more

> money on welfare than she can being out there, supporting herself—when I heard that, when I heard that, and I was like, I was disgusted. I swore to myself, as long as my two legs are able, and as long as my two arms are able, I'm gonna be out there doing a job . . . I see these blacks in Jersey City . . . And the food stamp bothers me. Because I see blacks out there buying food with food stamps eating better than I'm eating. When I was in college, I was twelve dollars a week in college, living on tuna fish and crackers. Yet there were other people out there eating filet mignon. So it just doesn't make sense. I was proud, I said, I'm not gonna go begging or anything. I worked, and that's what got me through. I didn't spend any money through the week. But I don't think it's fair. I don't think it's fair that way. (White female manager, age 33)

Underlying the attitudes these whites profess about black Americans is a sense of personal threat but in even greater measure a belief that black Americans violate the "moral values embodied in the Protestant Ethic."[28] The anecdotes the whites tell of black women quitting the cafeteria while "scheming" to collect welfare reinforce the images they have from the media and their own experiences with urban change that black Americans do not work hard, have too many children, and get government handouts:

> Well, I have a million of them [American blacks] in my town where I live. They have taken over the projects downtown where I used to live; now I live uptown. Characteristics? I think they are lazy. I think they are lazy and, now let's say, I don't want to be mean about this but, they just have too many kids. Like, they can't afford to have one or two, and they wind up with twelve. And then that, but if you compare it with a white couple, who will have maybe one, and then you'll turn around and a black couple who, the father usually doesn't even have a job, they have seven, you know? (White female manager, age 53)

While the managers at American Food freely expressed these opinions about blacks to the white interviewer, only one of them really saw herself as prejudiced; when asked about race relations at work, they all thought blacks unfairly saw racism where none exists. One of the chief ways in which the whites reassured themselves and me that there is a race-blind

meritocracy at American Food is to point to the black managers and supervisors in the company, all but one of whom are foreign-born.

Ironically, one of the concrete incidents of structural racism at American Food described by many of the black workers was the hiring of a white woman from outside the company to be a supervisor when the black workers thought many of them were qualified for the promotion. The woman who was hired as a supervisor was only 19 years old, although she had worked in food services for a number of years. Perhaps because of her age (she had not yet learned to censor her opinions), this woman was the most blatantly and unabashedly prejudiced of all our respondents:

> I feel that a lot of the stereotypes are true. I mean, they're uneducated, you know, a lot of them are poor. They're rude, they don't know how to carry themselves. Those types of stereotypes . . . They're very showy. Loud. Their music—which I happen to like—some of it is extremely different and aggressive and curses and, you know, fighting. They're very street people, I feel. And I think that some of it's stereotypical, like, you know, but like a lot of the people say they smell, they have, you know, body odor. And I really feel in many ways that it's true. I don't think that because of their hair—I don't think they shower every day. I mean, I don't know it for a fact. And I'm not saying it to be, you know, cruel. But I really, I don't think they shower every day. I don't think they are as hygienic as Amer—like white people. I think that white—not all white people, I think most white people are cleaner, a lot more sanitary and a lot more aware, you know. I enjoy now being more around Italians and white people, and I just feel more comfortable and I don't want to feel tension from other people. I mean, I just—I don't need that in my life. It wouldn't be because, you know, of the color of their skin. It would be because of everything that's involved with the color of their skin.

Q: Do you think that there are racial tensions now in New York between blacks and whites?

A: Oh, definitely. Definitely. And I think it's more and more that the blacks are creating it, and I think it's a shame. I think if they would stop blaming us, you know, for everything, then it would

> be a little easier . . . And I feel it's a real shame because I love New York . . . And I hate to feel like I have to leave it because of that reason. I always feel it will never be all blacks because of, you know, this right here, this trade center, the financial center. They couldn't take it over. They couldn't control it. They could be a part of it, a big part. But I think it's become—whites are becoming—whites are the minority I think now. Factually they are the minority, which is a shame. (White female supervisor, age 19)

Yet when this supervisor was challenged by the black workers about receiving her position when black workers with more seniority were passed over, she was shocked:

> We have a monthly shop meeting, and they said this is Suzie, she'll be running the Super Star Program, so one of the black gentleman who is a chef in the cafeteria stood up and said, well I feel, why is she getting hired? How long has she been here? So I thought he was just asking questions at first. So I said, well, just a month and a half. He says, well, I forgot exactly the words he used, something like "My people need jobs" or "I'm here for the minority and why is she getting the position?" . . . And that really hurt me a lot. I didn't even want to do my job after that. I felt like, they hate me.

The middle-class white teachers we spoke with also included a few blatant racists. Most white teachers, however, bent over backwards to present themselves as accepting of black people, and many felt genuinely warm toward their black students. Yet quite a few were uncomfortable with relations with black teachers at their schools and thought that blacks were too quick to see race as both a source of problems and as a solution to problems. They resent being told it's a "black thing" when trying to understand the behavior of their students. While the majority of teachers believed that having black teachers was important for their black students, some were concerned that a stress on black role models was being made at the expense of good education:

> We are now going for black role models. Okay? I will never again in this life do anything because I am the wrong color. We must have black role models. So we have people who look down on our stu-

> dents and then we have people who talk to them in street language, the language right out of the gutter. And they expect to be educated. And then they say this is a black thing. That doesn't work either because children have contempt for them. So we really need better teachers, and we need people who care, who really want to teach children. (White female teacher, age 47)

Given these underlying negative opinions of at least some whites in our society, it is not surprising that immigrant and American blacks experience both interpersonal and structural racism.

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE IMMIGRANTS

There are three main consequences to the West Indians' different expectations and understandings of race relations and the ways in which those expectations and understandings affect their interactions with whites. First, their different understandings of race relations contribute to their tensions with black Americans. Second, their different ways of dealing with race relations lead both to increased chances of social mobility for some and increased chances of bitter disappointment for others. Finally, over time the immigrants become more like African Americans, and their approach to race relations begins to change.

The first consequence—that black Americans and West Indians experience some tensions in how they experience race relations—has been documented in Chapter 3. To summarize, West Indians criticize American blacks for two seemingly contradictory characteristics—racialism and racial docility. The West Indians believe the African Americans are too racial, that is, too likely to cry race in situations where race has nothing to do with what is happening. They also believe that African Americans are sometimes too docile—that they do not stand up for their rights and their dignity because they have allowed the white-majority society to degrade them. For instance, this woman believes that when white managers treat their black employees badly, the black Americans do not handle the situation as well as she would:

> [The Americans] being afraid to say certain things. Once you know how to phrase it in the right way, or you don't higher your voice or