

## Second-Generation West Indian Women, Television and the Dialogical Self

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Employing the Bakhtinian concept of the dialogical self, this article examines how second-generation West Indian immigrant women negotiate their multiple cultural and national positions in the United States. Furthermore, it examines the manner in which the American media, particularly television, are reflective and constitutive of this process of identity formation. The article speaks to the theme of the journal issue in several ways. It highlights the polyphonic voices in the individual, and how these “selves” influence and are influenced by the cultural communities to which the individual belongs. With the “third world” immigrant as its subject, the article also necessarily addresses the relationship between global/ migratory individuals and their diasporic locales, and explores the individual and collective positioning of non-Western “minorities” in dominant Western communities.

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*[West Indian], but hyphenated; viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic, perhaps inferior, definitely different; viewed by [West Indians] as alien; their eyes say, “You speak [patois], but yuh not like me”; an American to [West Indians], a [West Indian] to Americans; a handy token sliding back and forth between the fringes of both worlds by smiling, by masking the discomfort of being pre-judged bi-laterally.*

**T**his excerpt from a poem titled “Legal Alien” by Pam Mora (altered by Kamille Gentles-Peart) vividly describes the experience of being multicultural. It foregrounds the multiplicity of a culturally hybrid existence, the feelings of belonging to two worlds without being able to claim either as home, the negotiations one has to engage in to maneuver the cultural spaces, and the anxieties that accompany fractured and hyphenated positions.

Such experiences of identity formation are particularly salient during this post-1965 era of migration to the United States. On October 3, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Immigration Bill which phased out the national origins quota system established in 1921. The new legislature valued family reunification and needed skills rather than immigrants' country of birth, theoretically allowing equal access to all peoples regardless of nationality ("Three Decades of Mass Immigration," par. 1). Unlike their pre-World War I counterparts, the majority of these "new" immigrants hail from outside of Europe (Perlmann and Waldinger 893), and many are transnationally engaged—living abroad, but actively participating in the lands of their origin (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 48). Given the differences in composition, as well as structural changes in the U.S. economy and society, traditional conceptions of immigrant acculturation do not and cannot be applied to these new immigrants (Portes and Zhou 76).

Several cultural studies scholars have reworked classical migration theories in relation to the "newcomers," and now researchers in the field have begun addressing the "new" second-generation immigrants, or those born to immigrants to the U.S. after 1965. The literature in this area primarily speaks to the second-generation's social adaptation in American society,<sup>1</sup> and their struggles to acculturate.<sup>2</sup> Others have explored the cultural identities of this group, trying to understand the multicultural nature of their sense of self. In general, the latter studies indicate that the second-generation construct hybrid subjectivities by merging their multiple cultural worlds, creating a distinct identity that draws on, but differs from that of, their parents and their diasporic space.<sup>3</sup>

However, scholars from the humanities and social sciences have begun to take a different approach to second-generation immigrant identity, one that envisions second-generation subjectivities not as static third spaces, but rather dynamic and dialogic processes. They conceive of second generation immigrant identity as fluid, as a continuous shifting between multiple positions and worlds. Employing this theoretical framework, what Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram refer to as the "multivoiced . . . dialogical self" (226), this article examines how second-generation West Indian immigrant women negotiate their multiple cultural and national positions in the U.S. Furthermore, I expand extant literature by examining the manner in which the media of the U.S. (television) are reflective and constitutive of this process of identity formation.

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1. See, for example, Portes and Zhou; Zhou and Bankston III.

2. See, for example, Dugsin; Hovey and King.

3. See, for example, Karakayali.

This article speaks to the “social/ individual dialectic” (Strelitz, “Biography” 65) theme of this journal issue in several ways. Firstly, it explores the relationship between the individual and ethnic communities. More precisely, the article highlights the polyphonic voices in the individual, and how these “selves” influence and are influenced by the cultural communities to which the individual belongs. In so doing, the dialogism between the individual and collective/ cultural community is exposed. The article also highlights other group categories, or “imagined communities” (Anderson), such as gender, race, and class, that traverse ethnic subjectivities and inform self-identity. With the “third world” immigrant as its subject, the article also necessarily addresses the relationship between global/ migratory individuals and their diasporic locales, and explores the individual and collective positioning of non-Western “minorities” in dominant Western communities. Moreover, the article examines the role played by mass media in group and individual identity formation and articulation as well as self-presentation. In short, the article calls attention to the intersection of cultural community and generation, gender, race, class and media in self-identity.

### **Cultural Hybridization, Dialogism and Media**

The concept of cultural hybridity has now been embraced by post-modern theorists as a means to transcend the essentializing tendencies of identity discourse. Postcolonial theorists (such as Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” and Homi Bhabha) suggest that cultural hybridity is generated by a dialogue across different cultures that occurs when two spaces are concurrently occupied. This process creates a space of liminality and dual consciousness that simultaneously contains elements of, while differing from, the original cultures. The composite parts are neither unproblematically juxtaposed, nor do they coexist in any preconceived manner, however. Rather, they comprise of heterogeneous elements with “shifting (self)-identifications and unpredictable alliances . . . all manners of collusions and complicities, and jockeyings for power” (Dayal 50). Cultural hybridity is therefore the product of constant negotiation and renegotiation, and erratic identifications and disidentifications with the receiving and home cultures.

The process of cultural hybridization necessarily engenders dialogical selves. Drawing on the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin and his proponents, Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram conceptualize the dialogical self as internalized, autonomous *I* positions or voices within an individual. One does not exclusively occupy any of these positions, but rather moves from one position or voice to another in response to circumstances. Furthermore, depending on the “socio-

cultural setting” of the individual, some voices are privileged over others as being more effective and appropriate (Hermans and Kempen qtd. in Bhatia and Ram 228). Bhatia and Ram cogently assert that this Bakhtinian conception of the self aptly applies to the immigrant self, providing a better theory to understand how immigrant groups “constantly negotiate their multiple and often conflicting, dialogical voices, histories, and subject positions . . . challeng[ing] the linear, static, universal models of acculturation” (229).

The dialogical self can also be effectively used to understand the multiple identity of second-generation West Indian immigrant women in the U.S., women who “participate, identify, and engage in more than one cultural-political system” (Siu 8). More precisely, the concept of “polyphonization” (Bhatia and Ram 230) is useful in illuminating these women’s engagement with the “third world” discourses of the West Indies and the hegemonic discourses of the U.S. Beyond highlighting the polyphonic dialogism of their subjectivities, this article also seeks to understand *how* these women move among the internalized voices of their multiple *I* positions. Specifically, I explore how the cultural discourses of U.S. and West Indian societies are brought together in the subjectivities of second-generation West Indian women in the U.S., and how these women remake their place in racial and ethnocentric relations and hierarchies. Dominant American media play a significant role in this process.

There has been an ongoing debate in cultural studies about “mass” culture and its relationship to the “masses.” On one hand is the assumption that media communications impose dominant ideology on passive, undifferentiated audiences, an argument most notably epitomized in the scholarship of the Frankfurt School (see for example Horkheimer and Adorno, “The Culture Industry”). On the other hand is the belief that individual viewers/ readers have the ability to interpret and thereby “produce” a text, a theory proposed in Stuart Hall’s seminal treatise “Encoding/ Decoding.” In this essay, Hall posits that mainstream cultural texts perpetuate the normative standards of the dominant class by disseminating “preferred meanings.” However, the encoded message and that which is received by the audience is often asymmetrical, as receivers have liberty to either accept the intended message, accept part of that message, or reject the message entirely; they may engage in dominant, negotiated or oppositional readings, respectively (Hall 125-27). According to Hall, the disparity between the intended message and its interpretation is due to the ideological positions held by individual “readers” which mediate their interaction with and acceptance of media texts, challenging the very notion of the “mass” in mass media.

Subsequent scholars have addressed this interaction between media and identity, exploring the dialogic relationship between media and self-presentations or performances, and demonstrating how media interactions are part of the presentation of our social and cultural selves. For example, Joe Grixti found that engagement with Western media, among other things, was used by Maltese youths as a symbol of cultural superiority, a means of distancing themselves from the indigenous culture while appropriating what was perceived as the better foreign/ Other (114). Similarly, Larry Strelitz found that his “coloured” South African respondent deployed engagement with American media in the process of “symbolic distancing” to separate himself from the “social ‘place’ designated to him by the apartheid state” (“Against Cultural Essentialism” 638).

This role of media in self-presentations is also evident among immigrant groups in general, and second-generation immigrants in particular. In her study of working-class, Mexican-American adolescent girls in San Antonio, Vicki Mayer found that the *telenovelas* (Spanish-language soap operas) that resonated with the lives of her respondents were those with characters that embodied the duality that characterized their own experiences in the U.S. She also noted that, while her respondents perceived *telenovelas* as keeping them connected to their heritage, they distinguished their pattern of viewing and interpretation from that of their Mexican relatives (485). In doing so, their engagement with *telenovelas* reflected their simultaneous critique of and identification with their Mexican heritage, and thus their dialogical selves. Also, Meenakshi Durham revealed that second-generation immigrant Indian teenagers dismissed purely American and Indian texts as being unrealistic and inconsistent with their lives in the U.S. Instead, they preferred transnational texts that dealt with their dual locations as Indians and Americans (155).

The television medium is particularly conducive to immigrants’ appropriation of texts for self-representation. Television’s segmented and fractured nature, as well as its repetitious schedule, its dependence on serial programming, and the inclusion of audience feedback in the development of plotlines, make this media mode resistive to narrative closure, unitary meanings and the construction of a “unified viewing subject” (Fiske 84). Television is thus the most open and “producerly” mass mediated text; it invites many concurrent readings and fosters fragmented individual subjectivities (Fiske 116) such as those developed within people of hybridized identity. Informed by this literature, my article also explores the “‘producerly’ relations” (Fiske 116) that second-generation West Indian women develop with American mainstream

television, illuminating how their television engagement reflects their navigation of their polyphony of voices.

### **Studying West Indian Women, Diasporic Identity and Media**

The information in this article was gathered through a methodological approach aligned with the research traditions of qualitative audience studies. Scholars who work in this tradition generally believe that social reality is at least partially constructed, and thus not completely knowable; researchers are not “immaculate perceiver[s] of objective reality” (Fortner and Christians 377); and researchers should aim to “understand how people in everyday natural settings create meaning and interpret the events of their world” (Wimmer and Dominick 103). Such researchers value interpretation above prediction and generalization, and use inductive rather than deductive reasoning to situate their respondents’ behaviors and attitudes in larger cultural and historical contexts (Christians and Carey).

Working within this research tradition, I conducted biographical interviews with second-generation West Indian women living in New York City. As Strelitz notes, “within media studies, the narrative or biographical interview provides a generally ignored, but potentially fruitful method for exploring both the intertextuality of everyday life and the social/ individual dialectic” (“Biography” 65). In other words, such ethnographic interviews are promising ways to resolve the methodological difficulties associated with exploring the intricate relationship between textual and cultural experiences and diasporic subjectivity.

I chose New York City as the research site because this city hosts one of the largest populations of English-speaking Caribbean immigrants in the U.S. With a population of more than half a million, the community is about five times the size of Grenada, and twice the size of Barbados (Foner 1). I focus exclusively on the women of this West Indian community because male and female immigrants respond differently in diasporic situations and need to be examined discretely (Eastmond 48-49; Buijs 4). Furthermore, Caribbean families, including those of the West Indies, are matrifocal, emphasizing relations to mothers and mothers’ relatives so that networks are formed by and around women (Ho 45), making them crucial to child-rearing and cultural preservation. However, the relationship of the second-generation to the place of migration is different from that of the first-generation, resulting in the development of different diasporic subjectivities (Brah 625) and a shift in cultural allegiances. Exploring the self-identity of second-generation women illuminates how these women contend with the cultural exigencies of both their homeland

and birthplace, and by extension, proffers insight into the transformation of the West Indian community in New York City.

I recruited participants using a snowball sampling technique (Goodman) which entailed identifying initial participants who were then asked to refer other participants for the study. This procedure was particularly useful for obtaining West Indian women who are a sort of “hidden population” (Heckathorn) that conventional means of recruitment cannot reach. Perhaps due to fear of deportation, or just general insecurities about living in a new country, West Indians tend to be very guarded and difficult to recruit. Many are living and working in the U.S. illegally, and have to remain as inconspicuous as possible. They are also not likely to join community organizations that require them to give personal information, so searching such directories would be futile. The most effective way to reach them, therefore, is through their networks.

Similar to ethnographic media scholars such as Janice Radway and Jacqueline Bobo, I employed intermediaries to recruit the initial subjects for the study (Weiss 34): I asked West Indian friends, relatives and associates to solicit their West Indian female associates and/ or clients. The criteria were birthplace and parentage (should be born outside of the West Indies to West Indian parents), age (should be adults or over 18 years of age), and place of residence (should be living in the U.S.). These initial participants were then asked to refer other women to participate. In all, my sampling strategy yielded nine women of ages ranging between 20 and 40 years old. Most of the women were (unintentionally) lower-middle and working-class, and had completed some form of post-secondary education.<sup>4</sup>

The interviews comprised of questions that fell into three major categories, namely, cultural norms of the West Indies, life in the U.S. and television engagement. When necessary, I followed each question with probes designed to obtain concrete descriptions. The interviews were one to two and a half hours long, and were tape-recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

The relatively small number of women interviewed facilitated the accurate collection of data from multilayered and multifaceted interviews. It allowed me to extensively pursue issues that emerged and unravel complicated meanings, and thus engendered a depth and complexity of analysis that would not have been allowed with a larger number of interviewees.

The narratives from the participants were supplemented with information

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4. I did not seek out women of a particular socio-economic background, nationality, or age, but rather these were the women who agreed to participate.

from my own experiences within the West Indian community in New York City. As an emigrant of Jamaica, I spent over five years in a major West Indian enclave in New York City where I interacted with West Indian family members and colleagues at social gatherings, in hair salons and restaurants, and in classrooms. While being of West Indian heritage and living in the community do not automatically make me an authority on this group, my cultural position provided the opportunity for informal observation of cultural traditions and texts, and afforded a level of access to the community that may not have been granted to researchers of other cultural backgrounds.

### **Establishing West Indian Identity**

The respondents experienced their subjectivity on two registers: They were legal citizens of the U.S., but cultural citizens of the West Indies, and wanted to be identified as such in New York City. A large part of their West Indian cultural identity was good work ethic and the prioritization of education and discipline, principles that they thought distinguished them from Americans. For instance, Mia stated, “I think that we raise our kids . . . just [with] pride. I think that West Indian people on a whole, they very prideful people . . . We don’t want our children on the street, and we don’t want them hanging [out] . . . and just the respect and the discipline. . . .”

For Mia, West Indians were different from (and better than) their American counterparts because they did not want their children to engage in activities (such as “hanging out”) that were considered morally objectionable and indicative of idleness and delinquency. She suggested that West Indians in New York City were better parents, wanting their children to achieve, unlike Americans. Her use of “we” to signify West Indians explicitly communicated her self-proclaimed inclusion in the “better” group and her distinction from Americans.

Shelly also shared,

I think that West Indian people have just totally different values from Americans. . . . They go all out for their men. I hardly ever hear a Jamaican woman bashing her man. . . . You wanna bring him up, and you wanna make him feel like they a man. Like I have [African] American friends . . . you know, just bashing them and making them feel like less of a man. I think that family runs deep with West Indian people. . . . I don’t see that with American people at all. . . . You 18, you can leave. . . . That type of thing. . . . Like as long as your kids are productive citizens and they going to school, and they doing



things. . . . Jamaican people, West Indian people for that matter, they stand behind you. But American people, . . . and I'm talking about myself. . . . It's so weird coming from me, right?

Shelly thought that African American women emasculated and belittled their male partners, and she disliked what she perceived as the American practice of making children leave home at eighteen years of age, both of which she thought weakened familial bonds. This indicates that her alliance with her West Indian heritage was at least partially constructed because of the perceived tighter communal bonds in the West Indian community as opposed to individualism and loss of community in American society. Personal relationships were thus important to her, contrary to what theories of the disconnected "mass" would indicate.

She also highlighted some of the traits that characterized a "good" West Indian in New York City, namely, productivity and education, the absence of which was the only grounds for sending children away from their homes. Shelly's statement also divulged her self-conscious negotiation of her dual-layered identity. She thought of herself as an American in some respects, but aligned herself with West Indian values that distanced her from what she considered the deficient values of Americans. Her self-reflective comment ("It's so weird coming from me, right?") demonstrated that she was not uncomfortable with her strategic positioning within New York City.

Tanya also said this about the white Americans in her college:

I think that we take more abuse from the world so it makes us, not numb to it, but able to take it more. If you have life easy, the least problem that you get is a big problem. And then [white Americans] party. I have this one friend, she's an art major in college and she can't draw, but she doesn't care. Her mother owns five businesses. She can run one. . . . They are a little wilder than me, the majority. The ones that I talk to would say . . . "I woke up this morning with Josh, and I don't even know how he got into my bed". . . . I think that our cultures are different; I can't deny that.

Tanya's statement exposes the intersection between collective identity and economic class, an "imagined community" constructed around socio-economic status: Working and struggle were claimed as part of her West Indian subjectivity while she associated wealth and fiscal comfort with white American identity. In fact, economic wealth was conflated with race and ethnicity so that one became the signifier for the other. She suggested that the economic (and, by extension, social and political) marginalization of people like her

(that is, black) fostered identities of struggle, while white Americans' affluence and comfortable lives created fragile and carefree subjectivities.

The women's value of hard-work and self-discipline was further substantiated by their discussions of media engagement. Most of the women responded dismissively to questions about television consumption habits, hastily commenting on their preoccupation with work, school and other "important," non-mediated activities. Julie said, "I don't watch too much TV. I'm always at work," and Karla, who was in the early stages of a Master's program, stated, "I don't really watch TV as before. . . . I haven't watched TV." Tanya snubbed the idea altogether, saying, "I don't watch television. . . . If it is on I will stare at it, but I would never turn it on." By undermining their television interactions (in spite of their subsequent discussions of frequently watched shows), the women deployed discussion of television engagement to reinforce the narrative of hard-work and productivity that they believed set them apart from indolent Americans.

As scholars such as Mary Waters (68), Joyce Justus (143) and Linda Basch (167) have documented, first-generation West Indians also present an identity characterized by the prioritization of education, discipline and good work ethic. People living on the islands are stereotyped as backward and lazy—by non-West Indians, but also by some West Indians living abroad as well—but West Indian émigrés to the U.S. *self-identified* as productive, model immigrants. Being raised in West Indian homes, these values were undoubtedly ingrained in the women, and their repetition of these principles was a manifestation of the West Indian *I* position in their identity.

American ideologies also surfaced in the women's construction of their identity. Specifically, their conflation of race and class in discussions of Anglo and African American people conspicuously reflect the image of these groups prolific in dominant American discourse. The racialization of poverty, the always already privileged whites (Gilens 67, 102), and the emasculating black woman (the Sapphire as described by Patricia Bell Scott) are ubiquitous in American mainstream ideology and are extensively reinforced in the media. As residents of the U.S. for most, if not all, of their lives, these women were exposed to such dominant American ideologies regarding race and class which became one of the voices in their identity. Ironically, rather than creating American subjects, these dominant ideologies of race and class gave the respondents the means to distinguish themselves from and claim superiority over Americans.

The influence of gender was also implicit within the American discourses they chose to deploy to establish their identity. The women distanced them-

selves from the negative images of American females presented in U.S. mainstream ideology; they separated themselves from the Sapphire and the “welfare queen” image associated with black women, as well as the vulnerability and frailty ascribed to rich, white women. It is also interesting to note that their distinction between U.S.-born West Indians and Americans challenged the notion of a homogenous “America,” exposing fractures in the “imagined community” that U.S. nationalist discourses create, and countering the idea of an undifferentiated American “mass.”

### **Challenging West Indian Traditions**

Notwithstanding the women’s claim of a West Indian identity, they actively contested some West Indian norms, specifically those that conflicted with their personal well-being and those that were evaluated negatively by Americans. One respondent who overtly challenged West Indian norms was Karla. She was passionate about teaching her seven-year-old daughter to express herself because she felt that the Barbadian standard that required children to be “seen, but not heard” had hindered her own achievement in American schools. She said,

In this day and age . . . she’s going to be competing with so many other people. She’s going to have to learn from now to speak up for what she believes to be important within her heart, and what she believes to be right and don’t grow up [like me]. I wasn’t really made to speak up. . . . Even now I’m sure I’m very reserved, but I’m trying to open up more. It’s not easy when you are so used to being some way and all of a sudden you have to change.

Karla felt that she as well as her daughter needed to cast off the West Indian tradition of timidity in order to successfully participate in New York City. She later confessed that she blamed and resented her mother for instilling this custom that she felt held her back in U.S. society.

Shelly also harbored bitterness towards her grandmother who, acting according to Jamaican customs, renounced her after she got pregnant at 15 years old. She shared,

I knew she was gonna treat me like that because it just wasn’t something that she was big on, and she let it be known. She taught us different than that. “I didn’t teach you that; I didn’t teach you to go sleep around.” Not that I was sleeping around, but that’s she how she looked at it. . . . God forbid, if my daughter has a baby young . . . I

wouldn't talk to her that way. . . . It was just so graphic and I felt like this little whore. This is my grandmother, and she's talking to me like that, this woman who taught me how to knead dough?!

Such cases of condemnation of teenagers who get pregnant are also prevalent in American society. However, what is important is that Shelly perceived her treatment as the result of her grandmother's West Indian upbringing. She subsequently detached herself from her grandmother and from what she considered the norm in Jamaican culture, and was determined to be different from her grandmother in this respect.

Zendra also critiqued what she perceived as the laid-back work ethic of West Indians in the islands. She stated,

For two weeks they had me down [to do a dance workshop]. But I had the American, New York mentality, and everyone down there is so lazy. If I say, "Come down, class start at 10," they would come down like 11:30. And they say, "Oh God, you hurting me; Zendra, you hurting me." And I would get so frustrated. . . . Then I just had to release all of that, and say this is the island; they not used to working like that.

Zendra's statement highlighted her critique of and distancing from West Indians living on the islands who she felt were not accustomed to systematic and sustained work.

Once again, discourses of gender were evident in their responses. Most of the women resisted what they perceived as the damaging treatment of girls in West Indian society, and by extension, women's position in the culture. Moreover, in their critique of West Indian culture, the women recuperated Western and American ideologies of "third world" societies. In the American imagination, children, in particular girls, being silenced, young ladies being irrevocably ruined by pre-marital sex and early pregnancy, and an easygoing lifestyle are all characteristics associated with life in un- and underdeveloped countries. These and other values have been used to classify and essentialize "third world" countries, such as those in the West Indies, as backward and unprogressive, and their inhabitants and emigrants as simple-minded and dull-witted. In particular, women from these nations are often stereotyped as illiterate, unprogressive people who perpetuate even the most archaic traditions. These ethnocentric American discourses about island nations informed the women's ethnic identity. Furthermore, their desire to distinguish themselves from island-born and island-based West Indians highlights another "imagined community" and *I* position (that of migratory generation) that informed their

group as well as self-identity, and shatters the notion of a homogenous West Indian community.

The respondents' statements revealed the multiple, often contradicting voices that comprise their identity, namely West Indian, American, migratory generation, gender and class. In addition to this polyphony of voices, a pattern of how the women moved among the discourses emerged. The participants seemed to claim positive West Indian values to distinguish themselves from unfavorable stereotypes of Americans held in the West Indian community (and indeed around the world). As Tanya said, "I am happy and proud to be West Indian because it makes me feel special and different and I like that. . . . I am not the average American." Monique was even more forthright when she said, "I'm a little happy I'm West Indian, and not just a regular black [American] person. . . ." On the other hand, the participants aligned themselves with American cultural norms to separate themselves from the negative conceptions of West Indians in U.S. and Western ideology. They adopted what they thought were the more liberal values of the U.S. to set themselves apart from the negative practices of the West Indian culture. This negotiation of their multiple *I* positions was also evident in their engagement with television texts.

### **Soap Operas and West Indian Subjectivity**

In general, the participants engaged with various television programs, creating a diverse television diet within and across respondents. The diversity of their tastes as well as the absence of a recurring genre or program in their discussions precluded identifying a pattern in the television fare they enjoyed. However, analysis of what the women said they did *not* engage with revealed congruities that could be linked to their dialogical selves.

Most of the women expressed their dislike of soap operas. In response to my question about the television shows she would not watch, Karla exclaimed, "Soap operas; I really hate soap operas. You couldn't imagine. . . . They are so fake and phony and it's like one woman in the soap opera has slept with every single male in the show. To me I think the acting is so poor." Shelly also said, "I hate soap operas. I hate them. I think they're stupid. . . . they have no meaning. I mean, this one's sleeping with this one, . . . now this one had a baby by this one, but this one's gonna kill this one. . . . It's just stupid. I hate soap operas; I hate them."

Elizabeth also rebuffed soap operas, saying, "Foolishness! White people's foolishness. They die and then two years later they come back. . . ."

Her statement suggests that she dismissed soap operas because they are products of the white mainstream; it is suggestive of soap operas as being racially addressed, and not speaking to her, a black woman of West Indian heritage.

Soap operas were unattractive to the women because, first, the world of these serials was incongruous with their own. The participants were attracted to television programs that resonated with their social locations and roles, and that were thus communicative of their positionalities. Shelly said,

I love *CSI*. I like suspense. . . . I mostly look at like cop shows and things like that. I like documentaries. . . . I'm . . . that type of person. I like suspense and I like documentaries. That's mainly what I look at on TV. . . . You know, I was trying to be a correctional officer up until a few months ago.

Margo expressed similar ideas when she spoke about why she was attracted to the series *Heroes*. She said, "I like the whole aspect of the little person . . . coming forth and being able to take care of others. . . . [*Heroes* appeals to me because] I am one of those people who always, always try and take care of people. That's just who I am."

By choosing programs that reflected their lives and who they were, these women demonstrated that they conceived of television engagement as an extension of their identity. They did not want texts that allowed them to escape from their lives, but rather programs in which they could see some elements of themselves. The opportunity to "read" their personal lives into texts designed for "the masses" is a unique feature of the television medium whose open narratives allow individuals to construct their own experiences and pleasures, and accept or reject texts based on individualized criteria (Fiske).

Soap operas did not meet the women's criteria for reflecting their lives, and were incongruous with their real existence. The main characteristics of U.S. soap operas are "an emphasis on family life, personal relationships, sexual dramas, emotional and moral conflicts . . . set in familiar domestic interiors with only occasional excursions into new locations" (Bowles 119). The characters are also generally white, and more attractive, glamorous and affluent than the typical person watching the show. Given the difference in race, class and identity of the characters in soap operas, the women had little opportunity to identify with these texts. The women's response to soap operas illustrated the intersection between gender, class and ethnicity in responses to mass media: Unlike middle-class, white American housewives for whom

soap operas created a fantasy world of escape (Ang), these working-class women of West Indian heritage were repelled by the un-reality of the shows' narratives.

Furthermore, soap operas' association with domestic spaces—in terms of the setting of the drama, but also in terms of the way it is perceived in popular ideology—did not resonate with the *image* that the respondents wanted to construct in New York City. In contrast to their self-portrayal as hardworking and industrious women, the soap opera genre is associated with labor-less wealth, and is the quintessential symbol of idleness. They are often upheld as archetypal television banality, and dismissed as cultural “trash.” In fact, in spite of their popularity worldwide, soap operas are considered the pastime of housewives and home-bodies, people (usually women) who do not make valuable contributions to the public sphere. The respondents' disassociation from soap operas was thus a reflection of their desire to present themselves as hardworking (West Indian), and their effort to reinforce that, while they were Americans, they did not share American indolence.

Interestingly, the women also seemed to denounce soap operas as a way to distinguish themselves from their island-born mothers, and by extension, their island-based heritage. When asked if their mothers shared similar predilection for their favorite programs, the women promptly and definitively denied any relationship between their tastes in television fare and that of their mothers. For example, Karla said,

[My mother] is big on soap operas, *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*. . . . Now that she is retired, she watches them during the day. . . . She loves soap operas and she doesn't like what I like, the court shows, comedies. . . . I just think that they don't appeal to her. She doesn't like what I like.

Similarly, Shelly answered, “No, no . . . [My grandmother] looks at soaps and news, and like romance stuff, and I'm not really into that stuff.” Mia, also determined to distinguish her television proclivities from those of her mother, exclaimed decisively, “NO . . . [She likes] soap operas, and the court shows, and *Law and Order*. . . . I like mystery, but I don't like *Law and Order*.” Even though she admitted that both she and her mother enjoyed programs of the crime-solving, suspense nature, she ensured that I understood that they did not like the same shows within this genre. Even Monique, who admitted that she made her mother watch the *King of Queens* comedy with her, suggested that there was a difference. She said, “I don't really think she be listening like

I want her to. I'll be like, 'Ma, you think that's funny?' She'll be like, 'Yeah,' but . . . I don't think she like really gets into it like I get into it. I feel like she's like, 'I can't wait for this to go on commercial.'"

The women thus constructed a firm dichotomy between the programs that spoke to them and those that appealed to their émigré caregivers, extricating themselves from their island-born and raised counterparts. The respondents used their media choices to communicate that, even though they were of the same cultural heritage as their mothers, they were different. In doing so, media engagement became a part of their construction of the "imagined community" of first and second generation West Indian immigrants.

Furthermore, most of the women claimed that, unlike them, their mothers preferred soap operas. Given the relationship between media engagement and identity, this suggested that soap operas' unsophisticated address reflected some aspect of the caregivers' lives and was indicative of the caregivers' own uncomplicatedness and simplicity in relation to American media. Tanya explicitly supported this argument when she said that her mother always required explanations of the drama and plots of the shows that she liked, suggesting that her mother did not relate to fast-paced, technological shows, or to the type of cynical address prevalent in modern American programming. Similarly, Monique implied that her mother did not "get" the humor of *King of Queens* as she did. They did not believe that their island-born caregivers were stupid; rather the women thought that their first-generation immigrant caregivers were somewhat different, less media-savvy (and thus less sophisticated) than they were, a fact that was reflected in their preference for soap operas. By dismissing soap operas, the participants also dismissed the part of their caregivers that these programs represent, namely, the simplemindedness and unworldliness that have been attributed to island-based West Indians, stereotypes that the women worked to distance from their own identity.

In sum, soap operas emerged as the mediated embodiment of the negative aspects of the women's multiple selves. Their dismissal of soap operas also reflected their desire to extricate themselves from derogatory female images in both their cultural spheres: Their rejection of soap operas, the quintessential example of what is often considered to be female-addressed, inane mass culture uselessness, was indicative of their resistance of the perceived worthlessness (laziness, fragility, voicelessness, backwardness) of women in both West Indian and American cultures.



## Conclusion

In this article, I argued that second-generation West Indian immigrant women developed a dialogical identity as American and West Indian citizens. They privileged the West Indian ideals of hard-work and self-discipline, distinguishing themselves from what West Indians perceived as the unproductivity of Americans. The women also concurrently aligned themselves with liberal, modernized American values, distancing themselves from the primitivism that surrounds West Indians in American ideologies. Gender, race and class identities interacted with their ethnic identity to create a rich, multilayered subjectivity. These negotiations were reflected in their disassociation from the television texts with which their island-born caregivers engaged and their rejection of soap operas. This genre seemed to embody the negative aspects of their identity: It signified the unproductivity that West Indians ascribed to Americans, the primitivism attributed to West Indians in American ideology, and the derogatory images of women in both.

The navigation of multiple *I* was not experienced unproblematically, however, as many of the women spoke of the difficulties associated with moving between two cultural spheres. Most of the confessions were related to feelings of marginalization, of not being able to fit into any one position, and thus having no “home.”

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