UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

Locating “Home”
Constructing West Indian American Identity
Through Caribbean Popular Music

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Musicology

by

Holland Rhodd-Lee

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Locating “Home”
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by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology
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Professor Jenny Johnson, Chair

This dissertation examines how Caribbean popular music (CPM) facilitates pluralistic identity construction in New York City's West Indian diaspora. Utilizing narrative ethnography, census data, and a multidisciplinary literature review, I argue that Afro-West Indian communities use CPM styles—specifically Jamaican dancehall and Trinibagonian soca—as musical contact zones for transcultural identity construction. Despite substantial scholarship on Caribbean American migration, musical taste formation, and music’s role in identity construction, no critical analysis addresses music-making as a site for transcultural engagement in U.S.-based Afro-West Indian communities. Drawing on diaspora, postcolonial, and transcultural studies, my work addresses this gap by situating Afro-West Indian musico-cultural practices within transcultural identity construction discourse.

My work employs the Pluralized Identity model, an anti-essentialist framework I developed to conceptualize the imaginary as a site for diasporic identity formation. It draws on

Premdas, Bhabha, Glissant, Rushdie, and Smith to examine how hybridity operates alongside structural inequality, recognizing that identities remain fluid yet crystallize around shared marginalization. Integrating Mann's embodied cognition (2015), Butterfield's selective acculturation (2003), Hulme's extended-Caribbean (1986), and Meehan's decolonizing contact zones (2008), my analysis reveals how CPM operates as a space wherein Afro-West Indian Americans navigate these inequalities while constructing transcultural identities.

My dissertation contributes to Musicology and Caribbean Studies by 1) addressing a literature gap, 2) illustrating how Afro-West Indian Americans interact with CPM, and 3) examining how cultural artifacts facilitate pluralistic identity formation.

The Dissertation of Holland Rhodd-Lee is approved.

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2026

DEDICATION

To Grandma, Keithie, She-She, & Grandma Pat.

Jenny, Elisabeth, Mary-Anne, & Mommy,

thank you to for getting me to the finish line.

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This dissertation reproduces brief excerpts of copyrighted song lyrics in Chapter 3, including material from Shenseea's "Be Good" (2021), Stefflon Don featuring Spice's "Clockwork" (2022), and a quoted lyric from Buju Banton's "Boom Bye Bye" (1992) as it appears in interview material. These reproductions are made in good faith under the fair use doctrine codified in 17 U.S.C. § 107. The use is transformative and noncommercial, serving the purposes of scholarly criticism, commentary, and analysis; the works quoted are previously published; only those excerpts necessary for the analytical argument have been reproduced; and the use has no foreseeable effect on the potential market for or value of the original works.

PREFACE

Truth is stranger than fiction, and given that this entire dissertation hinges on the idea that the Caribbean is an imagined state, why, then, should there be only one way to be Caribbean? Who has the authority to declare that one person's vision or interpretation of this identity is correct or false? Who gets to make that decision?

What I keep coming back to, between the interviews and the readings, is pain. There's joy, absolutely, but the undertone of it all is pain of loss, and people grieving in different ways. What comes across again and again, through every interview, every conversation throughout this journey, is that everyone wants a feeling of belonging. They want to feel like they fit. But the current conceptualization of Caribbean identity—of belonging to the West Indian nations—is so restrictive that many people feel as though they don't. Add to that the contestation of trying to fit into American society while being raised in a Caribbean tradition and culture, and the tension becomes suffocating.

The more I do this work, the more I keep coming back to the same conclusion: it's all a giant farce. A fantastical reenactment. A performance. The diasporic interpretation of Caribbeanness clings desperately to an imagined version of belonging—to a community, to an identity, to what that identity means. It is all a recreation.

If we consider the core principles of identity theory, which hold that there must be some level of buy-in, a unifying idea or commonality that binds people together, then the farce is structural. The entire thing is make-believe. It is fiction. A way of holding onto and preserving the remnants of what has been lost through migratory patterns of displacement, whether voluntary

or involuntary. The longing for the original persists, but that version is gone—lost to history, locked in the past.

What remains is ritual: the carnival, the food, the music, the language. These are not the Caribbean itself. They are the rites through which the Caribbean is conjured and sustained—a collective reenactment of an imagined original. And at some point, the recreation becomes so fictional because the "real" version is constantly evolving. A dialogic exchange persists between the original and the copy, but they do not match. Their divergence only widens. So then it becomes a question: how do we understand identity at all?

None of this implies it lacks meaning. Think of religion: practices that may not be grounded in empirical reality still carry profound significance for those who believe. In that sense, the farce isn't a deficiency. The fiction isn't a lie. The ritual isn't empty. They are all expressions of the same fundamental truth: that the Caribbean, as an identity, is an imagined construct—one that is real precisely because people make it so.

And that is where I see an opening, a liminal space in which this project is based. Because identity is imaginative—something we bring to life, invest in, and make tangible through belief—its constructedness isn't a limitation but a liberation. It gives us space to explore identities and the meanings they hold, to generate new conversations around transcultural identity, and to create room for nuance rather than rigid adherence to inherited norms. If the Caribbean was always a farce, always a fiction, always a ritual, then we can give ourselves permission to imagine it otherwise.

Narratives surrounding diasporic communities often hyperfixate on grief, erasing the complexity of lived experience. I refuse that erasure. I want to give space to those voices so they

do not have to feel like they are suffocating. So they can breathe. So they can inhabit a space that embraces all of who they are, without forcing them to choose which parts of themselves to sacrifice.

Locating "Home" engages this tension, exploring how transcultural identities negotiate and balance between seemingly opposing cultural worlds. The Lost–Found–Home model is designed to hold that complexity. Parts 1 and 2 move through experiences of loss and discovery, while Part 3 examines how music becomes a site where hybrid identities are constructed. The model enacts what the theory argues: identity is not fixed. It is something we practice, a farce we commit to, a fiction we co-author, a ritual we make real.

If Caribbean identity is a construct, then it can change. It can evolve. *We* can expand it to make room for more people to belong.

Yes, this may feel controversial. But the core is simple: there are infinite possibilities, so instead of being confined, we must open the space. Let people explore what it means to be Caribbean American, West Indian American—whatever identity they claim. Let them breathe.

That is the point of this project.

VITA

Holland Rhodd-Lee graduated from Wellesley College with a B.A. in Neuroscience and Music with departmental honors in music and received his Masters degree in Musicology from UCLA. His work has garnered several awards including the Lise Waxer Undergraduate Writing Prize from the Northeast Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology (2018); the Wellesley College Billings Academic Award in Music for his undergraduate thesis, “Social Modes of Listening: How Racial Identity and Music Shape Hook-up Culture at Same-Sex Colleges” (2019)—later published in the *Ethnomusicology Review* (2022). His recent article, “The Shape of Musicology to Come: A Case Study of Institutional Gatekeeping Through Graduate Assessment” (2025), appeared in *Rising Voices in Ethnomusicology*. At UCLA, he taught undergraduate courses in the Department of Musicology as well as writing courses in the Academic Advancement and Clusters Programs. His research interests include Caribbean popular music, diaspora studies, identity politics, Black studies, race and music, and gender and sexuality

INTRODUCTION

Where is “home” in the diaspora? The question sounds simple, but it contains multitudes. This dissertation examines how that question gets answered sonically: how Caribbean popular music (CPM) facilitates pluralistic identity construction within New York City’s West Indian diaspora, operating as a contact zone in which Afro-West Indian Americans negotiate structural inequalities while actively building transcultural selves. Drawing on narrative ethnography, census data, and a multidisciplinary literature review, I argue that two CPM styles—Jamaican dancehall and Trinibagonian soca—function as contact zones for transcultural identity construction, and that these genres do not merely reflect diasporic identities already formed but participate in producing them.

Despite the immense scale of Caribbean migration to the United States and the profound influence of Caribbean-descended communities on American popular music and culture, no critical analysis has yet addressed music-making as a site of transcultural engagement within U.S.-based Afro-West Indian communities. This absence is striking. Substantial scholarship exists on Caribbean American migration, musical taste formation, and music’s role in identity construction, but these conversations have not converged on the specific musico-cultural practices through which Afro-West Indian New Yorkers construct belonging. My work addresses this gap by situating those practices within transcultural identity construction discourse, drawing on diaspora, postcolonial, and transcultural studies.

The Black Experience in America Isn't Monolithic

The erasure begins with categorization. Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans constitute distinct ethnic groups with different cultures and histories, yet these distinctions have been largely overlooked in academic discourse.[1] Although both groups frequently inhabit shared communities—creating plural societies that serve as fertile sites for transcultural exchange—Afro-Caribbeans' subsumption into narratives of the Black experience in America, and their forced ascription as African Americans in U.S. census records, suppresses their cultural distinctiveness and obscures their contributions to American popular music and culture.

The origins of American hip hop offer a salient example. Jamaican DJs such as Kool Herc in the 1970s transplanted sound system cultural practices, including the art of toasting, into the emergent genre.[2] Doing so dispersed Black nationalist ideals that had been circulating within Jamaican youth countercultures into early hip hop, profoundly shaping both Black artistic production and African American thought in New York City.[3] That one of the most consequential developments in American popular music was catalyzed by Caribbean diasporic cultural practice—and that this fact remains peripheral in most accounts of hip hop's origins—illustrates the broader pattern of erasure that this dissertation confronts.

[1] McGill 2005; Meehan 2009; Lorick-Wilmot 2018.

[2] Brewster & Broughton 2022.

[3] Meehan 2009, 204.

Beyond Beautiful Cosmos

Among the most significant scholarly efforts to rethink Caribbean diaspora beyond the grammar of loss is Tina K. Ramnarine's *Beautiful Cosmos: Performance and Belonging in the Caribbean Diaspora* (2007). By insisting that diaspora constitutes a mode of multi-sited dwelling rather than a condition of perpetual displacement, Ramnarine challenged a scholarly consensus that had long treated diasporic subjects as defined primarily by what they had left behind. Her ethnography of calypso, steelpan, reggae, and carnival across London, Toronto, Helsinki, and Dar es Salaam demonstrated that Caribbean musical performance does not simply express a longing for home—it produces home, generating what she calls a "beautiful cosmos" in which multiple subjectivities are rehearsed and experienced simultaneously. The intervention was necessary and overdue. It shifted the analytical center of gravity from grief to practice, from nostalgia to creative agency, and opened a space for studying diasporic belonging as something made rather than mourned.

But the breadth that gives *Beautiful Cosmos* its sweep also marks its limits. Ramnarine moves across genres, geographies, and performance contexts at a panoramic scale, treating calypso in Britain, salsa in dance clubs, and carnival in Canada as manifestations of a single philosophical reorientation. What this approach gains in theoretical ambition it sacrifices in ethnographic specificity. We learn that diaspora is home, but not how diasporic subjects arrive there—not the disorientation that precedes the dwelling, not the contested negotiations through which particular communities, in particular places, use particular musics to construct a sense of

belonging that did not exist before they built it. Ramnarine's "diaspora as home" model offers a destination without mapping the route.

This dissertation picks up where that model leaves off. Where Ramnarine proposes that diasporic Caribbean communities inhabit a beautiful cosmos, I ask how they construct it—and what it costs. The Lost-Found-Home framework developed in the chapters that follow aren't a rejection of Ramnarine's insight but an attempt to give it ethnographic scaffolding: to trace the processual, uneven, and genre-specific ways that Afro-West Indian New Yorkers move through experiences of cultural disorientation (Lost), recognition and communal re-anchoring through musical practice (Found), and the ongoing, never-fully-settled labor of making home in a place that isn't where you are from but is, irreversibly, where you are (Home). The framework is designed to counteract grief-dominant narratives about diasporic communities without romanticizing the conditions under which belonging gets made.

The Pluralized Identity Model

To do this analytical work, this project employs the Pluralized Identity model, an anti-essentialist framework that I developed to conceptualize the imaginary as a site of diasporic identity formation. The model draws on the work of Ralph Premdas, Homi Bhabha, Èdouard Glissant, Salman Rushdie, and M.G. Smith to examine how hybridity operates alongside structural inequality, recognizing that identities remain fluid even as they crystallize around shared experiences of marginalization. Integrating Larissa King Mann's theory of embodied cognition,[4]

[4] Mann 2015.

Sherri-Ann Butterfield's premise of selective acculturation (2003), Peter Hulme's concept of the extended-Caribbean,[5] and Kevin Meehan's decolonizing contact zones,[6] my analysis of interview and survey data reveals how CPM functions as a space in which Afro-West Indian Americans negotiate structural inequalities while actively constructing transcultural identities.

I've selected dancehall and soca as my focal genres not only because of their distinct yet complementary genealogies and their different relationships to difference, but also because they formed a constitutive part of my sonic environment growing up in New York City's Caribbean community. This biographical situatedness informs both my research questions and my methodological approach. I'm not studying these communities from the outside. The questions I ask are questions I've lived.

Contributions

This dissertation makes three contributions to Musicology and Caribbean Studies. First, I address a substantive gap in the existing literature by providing the first critical analysis of music-making as transcultural engagement within U.S.-based Afro-West Indian communities. Second, I illustrate the particular ways in which Afro-West Indian Americans engage with CPM—not as passive consumers of imported culture but as active agents constructing pluralistic identities through sonic practice. Third, I examine how musico-cultural artifacts facilitate pluralistic identity formation, offering the Lost-Found-Home framework and the Pluralized Identity model as

[5] Hulme 1986.

[6] Meehan 2008.

analytical tools that may prove useful beyond the specific communities and genres examined here.

Going: U.S. Immigration Policies And The Windrush Generation

New York City is home to the second-largest Caribbean community in the United States and the largest non-Hispanic Caribbean community in the country.[7] The city's Caribbean diaspora[8] constitutes 20% of its foreign-born population, with Jamaicans, Guyanese, Haitians, and Trinibagonians comprising the largest non-Hispanic immigrant groups.[9] According to 2016 demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), approximately 13 million individuals of Caribbean descent resided in the United States,[10] with 4.29 million accounting for 9.8% of the total U.S. foreign-born population.[11] By 2019, the ACS reported that the foreign-born Caribbean population had grown to 4.5 million, representing a 4.7% increase from 2016.[12] A substantial share settled in New York State, whose total foreign-born population of 4.4 million[13] made it the third-largest immigrant destination in the country.[14]

[7] The passage of the Nationality Act of 1965 (a.k.a. the Hart-Cellar Act) led to the number of Caribbean immigrants living in the U.S. between 1960 and 2009 skyrocketing from 193,922 to 2 million. Between 1980 and 2000, the Caribbean immigrant population growth rate increased to over 50% every ten years (McCabe 2011; Zong and Batalova 2019).

[8] In New York City, where the majority of Black Caribbean immigrants emigrated from the Anglophone Caribbean, the proportion of Black Caribbean immigrants in the city rose from 1.3% in the early 1900s to 12.7% of the total population by 1923. Reimers 2005.

[9] Maddox 2018; Department of City Planning 2013.

[10] This figure represents approximately 4% of the total U.S. population in 2016.

[11] American Community Survey 2016; U.S. Census Bureau 2020.

[12] This constituted 10% of the United States' 44.5 million total foreign-born population in 2019.

[13] This figure equaled 22% of New York State's total population in 2019.

[14] American Community Survey 2020.

Migration from the Caribbean to the United States is an intricate and continuously evolving story, shaped at every turn by the racialized and xenophobic logics embedded in U.S. immigration law. Historically, immigration legislation has functioned as a direct institutional response to anti-Black and anti-immigrant sentiment directed at non-white, non-Western/Northern European migrants. Caribbean migration to the United States can be traced to the early seventeenth-century slave trade and the forced displacement of African peoples, though it was not until the post-Civil War era of the late nineteenth century that voluntary, large-scale Caribbean migration began to register as a demographic force.[15]

Prior to the Naturalization Act of 1870, immigration and citizenship were governed by the Naturalization Act of 1790,[16] which restricted naturalization to white immigrants. The 1870 Act extended naturalization rights to persons of African descent, opening a legal pathway for Caribbean migrants seeking economic opportunity in the United States. This first wave consisted primarily of Black West Indian laborers participating in the U.S. agriculture's British West Indies Program, along with Cuban political exiles.[17] Between 1900 and 1930, the foreign-born Black Caribbean population in the United States grew from approximately 20,000 to 100,000, with the majority settling in Southern Florida, New York, and Massachusetts. In New York City, the proportion of Black Caribbean immigrants rose from 1.3% in the early 1900s to 12.7% of the

[15] Zong and Batalova 2019.

[16] The Naturalization Act of 1790 (1 Stat. 103) was enacted on March 26, 1790, as the first U.S. law to establish standardized procedures for naturalization. It restricted citizenship to "free white persons" of good character, thereby excluding white indentured servants, Native Americans, free and enslaved Black people, and, by later interpretation, people of Asian descent.

[17] Zong and Batalova 2019.

total city population by 1923.[18] This expansion occurred despite the Immigration Act of 1924,[19] which institutionalized the National Origins Formula[20] and imposed an English literacy test as a condition for naturalization.[21]

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Cellar Act) introduced sweeping reforms to the U.S. immigration system. It dismantled the de facto discrimination that had favored Western and Northern European migrants and formally abolished the National Origins Formula and the English literacy requirement instituted by the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924.[22] Importantly, however, while the Hart-Cellar Act eliminated the racially coded quota system, it preserved the practice of numerical limits per country, and also limited total immigration.

The Hart-Cellar Act also exempted immediate relatives of U.S. citizens from quota restrictions and, for the first time in American history, placed numerical limits on Western European immigration. As a consequence, the second wave of Caribbean migrants was composed predominantly of family members of earlier immigrants who typically held working-class or agricultural occupations, in contrast to the more economically diverse first wave of the

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[18] Reimers 2005.

[19] The Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) was among the most consequential immigration laws in U.S. history. Its principal provisions included the exclusion of immigrants from all Asian countries, the imposition of quotas on migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, an English literacy requirement for naturalization, and the establishment of the U.S. Border Patrol. Though principally aimed at restricting Southern and Eastern European and Asian immigration, the law substantially curtailed the entry of non-White migrants more broadly.

[20] The National Origins Formula established immigration quotas capping entry from the Eastern Hemisphere at 3% of each nationality's representation in the 1890 census (deliberately excluding more recent, and more diverse, census data). Originally enacted as a temporary measure in the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, it was made permanent under the Immigration Act of 1924 and remained in force until its abolition by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

[21] Dodson and Diouf 2005.

[22] Ludden 2006.

early twentieth century.[23] Despite its limitations, the law's significance for Caribbean immigration cannot be overstated. The Caribbean-born population in the United States grew from 193,922 in 1960 to approximately 2 million by 2009, with population growth rates exceeding 50% per decade between 1980 and 2000.[24][25] This second major wave of Caribbean migrants is commonly referred to as the Windrush Generation.[26]

The scale and longevity of the Caribbean diaspora's presence in the United States makes a striking counterpoint to the scarcity of scholarly attention it has received. This gap isn't incidental; it reflects broader patterns of marginalization within academic discourse and signals the urgent need for sustained scholarship on Caribbean communities in the U.S., particularly work that examines the relationships Afro-Caribbeans and West Indian Americans maintain with their musico-cultural practices and traditions.

Making Waves: The U.S. Caribbeanization

Members of the U.S. Caribbean diaspora engage with a diverse array of CPM.[27] Among non-Hispanic, Anglophone Afro-Caribbeans (Afro-West Indians), Jamaican dancehall is among the most widely and regularly practiced styles. Scholarly engagement with CPM's role in the

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[23] Zong and Batalova 2019.

[24] McCabe 2011; Zong and Batalova 2019.

[25] Zong and Batalova note that the population growth rates between 1980–1990 and 1990–2000 were 54% and 52%, respectively.

[26] The Windrush generation refers to the Afro-Caribbean migrants who immigrated to North America and Europe in the postwar period to fill labor shortages created by World War II, settling primarily in Canada, the U.S., England, France, and the Netherlands. The term, more commonly used in the United Kingdom, derives from the HMT Empire Windrush, the ship that carried large contingents of Caribbean migrants to Britain beginning in 1948.

[27] CPM encompasses a broad array of styles and genres originating in nations including Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Guyana, and Barbados. Rooted in the musical traditions of West African enslaved peoples, CPM also carries European, Indian, and Indigenous cultural influences, reflecting the region's layered colonial history.

transcultural, pluralistic identity construction of Afro-West Indian communities in New York City remains severely underdeveloped within Caribbean, musicological, and American studies.[28] This is a lacuna that persists despite the diaspora's substantial presence, the proliferation of collaborative projects between American and Caribbean musicians,[29] the growing visibility of Caribbean music on U.S. *Billboard* charts, and its demonstrable influence on American popular music culture.

My own Jamaican heritage was transmitted to me through food, music, and sustained engagement with Caribbean communities in the Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods of New York City. Family members cultivated in me a sense of pride in and responsibility toward my Jamaican identity, and the broader Caribbean community to which I belong. That sense of belonging, rooted in a community with enduring ties to the Caribbean and a rich, vibrant cultural history, is the animating force behind this project. It is precisely because of this connection that I seek to address the underrepresentation of the Caribbean community in musical and diasporic scholarship, and to contribute to the study of Caribbean culture's ongoing globalization.

[28] Constance R. Sutton and Elsa Chaney's edited anthology Caribbean Life in New York City (1987) represented an early sustained effort to document the sociocultural dimensions of Caribbean diaspora life in the U.S. While it helped inaugurate a wave of academic scholarship on this community, scholarly engagement with the subject had largely subsided by the early 2000s.

[29] Bryan 2019; Williams 2021.

Setting The Scene: Defining The Caribbean and Understanding Its Cultural Pluralities

Locating the "Caribbean"

To understand CPM's relevance as a site in which Afro-Caribbean Americans explore and construct identity, one must first grapple with a prior question: where, and "what," is the Caribbean, and what forces produced the Caribbean diaspora in the United States? There is little consensus among Caribbean scholars as to which geographical areas constitute the Caribbean region. For this study, I adopt Premdas's definition, which draws upon Wagley's "Plantation America" semi-hemispheric cultural framework[30] to encompass the islands of the Caribbean Sea together with several mainland regions of Central and South America with coastlines on the Caribbean Sea, including Belize, Guyana, French Guiana, and Suriname.[31]

The Caribbean is commonly organized into three broad linguistic subregions shaped by the region's colonial histories with Spain, Britain, and France, though a wide array of creole languages and dialects also circulate across its territories.[32] The Hispanophone Caribbean, or "Hispanic Caribbean," comprises the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (a U.S.

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[30] Anthropologist Charles Wagley proposes a regional classification system for the cultural spheres of the American hemisphere. He places the Caribbean within "Plantation America"—a region spanning the Caribbean islands, the upper Brazilian coastline, the Guianas, the Central American Caribbean coast, and the Southern United States—all areas exploited for natural resources like sugar and gold. Many Caribbean scholars, myself included, find this framework useful for demarcating the region and distinguishing the colonial influences that shaped the hemisphere (Wagley [1960]1957).

[31] Premdas 1996.

[32] The Netherlands and Denmark constituted additional, though comparatively minor, colonial presences in the region. Denmark ceded its Caribbean territories (St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix) to the United States through the 1916 Convention for the Cession of the Danish West Indies. The Netherlands governed the Dutch West Indies (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius, and Sint Maarten) until Aruba seceded in 1986; Sint Maarten and Curaçao gained autonomous status within the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 2007; and Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba became Dutch municipalities that same year.

territory). The Anglophone Caribbean, also known as the "British West Indies" or the "West Indies," includes former British colonies now constituted as independent nations (Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Guyana, Belize, the Bahamas, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Kitts-Nevis, Grenada, Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines), current member nations of the British Commonwealth (the Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos, the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat, and Anguilla), and the U.S. territory of the American Virgin Islands. The Francophone Caribbean encompasses the independent nation of Haiti, current French territories (Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana), and the French portion of the Franco-Dutch island of St. Martin/St. Maarten, jointly governed by France and the Netherlands.

Despite its linguistic diversity, the Caribbean is bound by a shared racial and ethnic history rooted in the violence of European colonialism. The predominant colonial powers—England, France, and Spain—enslaved and nearly exterminated the aboriginal populations[33] of the region, replacing them with Africans trafficked from Western and Central Africa to perform the brutal labor required by the plantation economy.[34] In the West Indies, the British additionally imported indentured servants, primarily from India and China, to work on sugar plantations and within other sectors of colonial society.[35] The result was a population of extraordinarily diverse ethnic and racial composition, constituting what Jamaican social anthropologist and poet M.G. Smith characterized as pluralistic societies:[36] ecosystems in which racial and cultural pluralities

[33] The original inhabitants of the Caribbean included the Taíno, Caribs, Ciboneys, and Arawaks.

[34] Premdas 1996.

[35] Premdas 1996.

[36] Marcus Garfield (M.G.) Smith introduced the pluralistic society framework in *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* (1965), describing Caribbean societies as comprising multiple cultural sections that lack a shared social identity but are bound together by intertwined economic and sociopolitical structures. While the model usefully contextualizes

proliferate—and which, crucially, created the conditions for the musico-cultural exchange and evolution that animate CPM.

Pan-Africanism & The Development of Caribbean Popular Music

Anténor Firmin & The Rise of Black Consciousness

Anténor Firmin (1850–1911)—Haitian anthropologist, ethnologist, philosopher, and barrister—stands as one of the founding figures of the modern Black consciousness tradition. Among Haiti's earliest post-revolutionary intellectuals, Firmin sought to contest the racial prejudices directed against Haitians and people of African descent, asserting their dignity, humanity, and cultural achievements at a moment when making such claims demanded considerable courage.

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, discourses on colonialism and slavery preoccupied thinkers across the African diaspora, particularly throughout the American hemisphere and the African continent. Firmin likely conceived his vision of Pan-Caribbean unity—a sociopolitical solidarity across the Caribbean region—following his encounter with Puerto Rican intellectual and abolitionist Ramón Emeterio Betances (1827–1898) at a gathering of the Society for Latin American Unity, where the two men discussed their shared aspiration for political sovereignty across the Caribbean.[37][38] Firmin subsequently became the architect of the Caribbean Confederation project,[39] which sought to unify the Greater Antilles islands of Cuba, Haiti, the

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the region's sociocultural diversity, critics argue it reifies superficial differences, inhibits nationalism, and privileges colonial constructs of race and ethnicity (Trouillot 1992; Ryan 2012). They contend it offers a myopic view of a region defined by overlapping diasporas and risks portraying the Caribbean as lacking a coherent identity of its own.

[37] Chaar-Perez 2013.

[38] Chaar-Perez 2013.

[39] Firmin conceived of the Caribbean Confederation project between 1875 and 1898.

Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico.[40] Though unrealized during his lifetime, the enduring influence of his vision is visible in contemporary inter-Caribbean coalitions such as CARICOM.[41]

In 1885, Firmin published *De l'égalité des races humaines* (On the Equality of Human Races),[42] a rigorous rebuttal to Count Arthur de Gobineau's (1816–1882) 1853 *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaine*s, which had deployed polygenism[43] and racialist physical anthropology in service of white supremacy. Firmin's treatise laid the intellectual groundwork for both Pan-Africanism and Pan-Caribbeanism: two ideological movements dedicated to cultivating a "Black consciousness" across the African diaspora by promoting racial equality, solidarity, and collective identity among people of African descent.[44] His vision of Pan-Caribbeanism should be understood as a conceptual precursor to his collaborative work on Pan-Africanism and to the organization of the First Pan-African Conference in 1900, undertaken alongside fellow Haitian compatriot Bénito Sylvain (1868–1915) and Trinidadian activist Henry Sylvester Williams (1867–1911).[45]

Pan-Africanism emerged from these efforts with a set of core ideological commitments: that the social, economic, and political advancement of people of African ancestry requires a

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[40] Lara 2007.

[41] The Caribbean Community (CARICOM), is an intergovernmental organization and economic union of Caribbean nations. It was established in 1973 with the signing of the Treaty of Chaguaramas, with the aim of promoting economic integration, foreign policy coordination, and cooperation in various fields among its member states.

[42] Firmin's work is regarded as a foundational contribution to the Négritude movement and is credited with influencing American anthropologist Melville Herskovits (1895–1963) and Haitian doctor, diplomat, and ethnographer Jean Price-Mars (1876–1969).

[43] Polygenism is the theory that distinct human races or ethnicities have separate biological origins and therefore constitute discrete species rather than variants of a single species.

[44] Rexer 2013.

[45] Lara 2007.

collective dedication to strengthening the bonds among all indigenous and diasporic African peoples, and to advancing anti-colonial and anti-slavery agendas.[46] Firmin's intellectual legacy resonated across subsequent generations of scholars and activists, including W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001), and Aimé Césaire (1913–2008). One concrete manifestation of this lineage is the rise of sound system culture and contemporary Jamaican popular music in the twentieth century.[47]

Marcus Garvey & the Rastafari's Jamaica

Drawing upon Marcus Garvey's Black nationalist movement[48] and the tradition of Ethiopianism,[49] the Rastafari movement played a vital role in anti-colonial and post-colonial resistance across the Caribbean.[50] Arising amidst the cultural ferment of 1930s Jamaica, Rastafarianism[51] emerged as an Afrocentric ideology, counterculture, and religious movement among dispossessed Afro-Jamaicans living in impoverished ghettos and shanty towns.[5253] Rastafarians rejected white supremacy and colonial oppression,[54] calling for the abolishment of British colonial rule and the

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[46] Abdul-Raheem 1996.

[47] For an engaging overview of sound system and dance hall culture, see Chris Mench, "The History of Sound Clash Culture," for Genius (August 18, 2017).

[48] Black Power critiqued white Christianity and capitalism alongside Rastafarian denunciations of Babylon; Rastafarianism is thus ideologically intertwined with contemporaneous Black freedom struggles. See Horace Campbell, Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney (Campbell 1987).

[49] Ethiopianism articulates the ideas of Pan-Africanism and Black nationalism (Garvey 1923; Padmore 1956).

[50] Garvey 1923; Padmore 1956; Nkrumah 1963; Campbell 1987; Moses 1996.

[51] Rastafarianism emerged in the wake of the 1930 coronation of Ras Tafari Makonnen as Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, whose reign lasted until 1974. Central to Rastafari theology is the conviction that Selassie was a messianic figure and the Second Coming of Jesus, sent by Jah (God) to redeem Black people oppressed by colonization and white supremacy in Babylon (i.e., Western society) (Clarke 1986; Bonacci 2013; Taylor 2015).

[52] Shanty towns are squatter settlements typically constructed from wood and mud without adequate social or structural infrastructure.

[53] Clarke 1986; Bonacci 2013; Taylor 2015.

[54] This rejection extended to the Rastafarian refusal to refer to the country by the name "Jamaica" and a repudiation of its national sovereignty despite inhabiting its territory (Meehan 2009, 122).

formation of an autonomous Pan-African nation.[55] The Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey, a central figure in the Pan-African and Black nationalist movements, championed African diaspora self-determination and the vision of a global Black nation within a nation—a framework Rastafarianism adopted in advancing its own goal of an autonomous Black Jamaican polity.[56] The movement's emphasis on African identity, pride, and self-determination constituted a key cultural resource for political resistance against racism and colonialism.

Despite repression and periodic co-optation by the post-colonial Jamaican state, Rastafarianism cultivated a distinctive culture of resistance through language, dress, hairstyle, diet, the ritual use of cannabis, music, and communal living, fostering solidarity and sustaining collective identity.[57] Prominent Rastafari leaders like Leonard Howell defied the colonial state and faced persecution; the movement survived by constructing its own spaces and networks.[58] In doing so, Rastafarianism demonstrated the mobilizing power of cultural symbols and practices in revolutionary struggle, prefiguring later theoretical accounts of culture's role in resistance.[59] Its influence expanded as reggae gained international prominence.[60] Roots reggae's entanglement with Rastafarianism gave musical form to Jamaican ghetto hardship, while conveying racial solidarity and affirming the humanity and divinity of Black people worldwide—a global Black Power reckoning born directly from the legacies of resistance to European colonization.[61] Roots

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[55] The Pan-Africanist emphasis on repatriating Black exiles across the African diaspora aligned closely with Rastafarian aims to return to spiritual and physical homelands (Campbell 1987).
[56] Fanon 1961; Said 1978; Meehan 2009.
[57] Campbell 1987.
[58] Campbell 1987.
[59] Campbell 1987.
[60] Campbell 1987.
[61] Campbell 1987.

artists such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Burning Spear became the international voices of Rastafari consciousness, reaching global audiences; Marley, in particular, played a central role in the cultural globalization of Rastafarianism.[62]

Jamaican Popular Music & Inter-Diasporic Contact Zones

Originating in 1940s Kingston, Jamaica, sound systems—musical collectives comprising deejays/toasters,[63] sound engineers,[64] selectors,[65] and an MC[66]—transformed Jamaica's musical landscape throughout the 1950s. They provided Jamaican youth who could not afford radios with access to popular American styles such as jazz and rhythm and blues, as well as to emerging local forms.[67] As sound systems and dance halls grew in popularity, they became indispensable communal spaces and de-facto cultural hubs for the dissemination of homegrown styles—ska,[68] rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall—collectively dubbed "the people's music."[69]

In a society where a significant portion of the population lived in poverty, sound systems filled a crucial gap, offering access to music for those with limited opportunities to engage with it

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[62] Campbell 1987.

[63] The deejay or toaster is the group member who speaks or "toasts" over records, a practice from which rapping originates and which carries forward elements of West African oral traditions (Cooper 2004).

[64] The sound engineer oversees the group's equipment, which typically comprises a PA system, generators, and the massive speaker arrays housed on flatbeds or in pickup trucks (Cooper 2004).

[65] The selector chooses, mixes, and produces the dubplates (i.e., soundtracks) for sound system events (Cooper 2004).

[66] The MC (master of ceremonies) functions as the group's manager, securing locations for dance halls, coordinating with promoters, and operating the turntables during events (Cooper 2004).

[67] Kevin O'Brien Chang and Wayne Chen, Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Carolyn Cooper, Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[68] Emerging in the late 1950s, Jamaican ska—the precursor to rocksteady and reggae—traces its musical roots to kaiso/calypso and synthesizes Jamaican folk styles (mento), calypso, American jazz, and rhythm and blues. The classic ska sound is characterized by prominent horn arrangements, a walking bassline, heavy syncopation, and the "skank": off-beat guitar chops paired with a fast, up-tempo rhythmic feel.

[69] Chang and Chen 1998; Cooper 2004.

through conventional means. Sound systems became a central fixture in Jamaican youth culture, fostering an environment in which new forms of expression and social commentary could thrive. They also offered a platform for voices and critiques that mainstream media might otherwise silence or marginalize. The growth of sound system culture coincided with a significant shift in linguistic practice: the extensive incorporation of patwa in lyrics and performances challenged the dominance of Jamaican Standard English, which had long been upheld as a status symbol and the expected register for public discourse. The embrace of patwa in this context constitutes a subversive act against linguistic hierarchy and a celebration of the vernacular idiom of Jamaica's people.

Sound systems also draw deeply from West African musical traditions, incorporating sonic elements such as syncopation and a pronounced emphasis on rhythm and basslines that are characteristic of Afro-Caribbean musical cultures more broadly. Popular music practices originating in sound systems—including toasting (i.e., rapping), vocal battling, the amplification of bass frequencies, polyrhythmic syncopation, and sampling (i.e., riddims)[70]—have become foundational to a range of global popular music genres, including dancehall, soca, hip-hop, and reggaetón.

As Jamaica developed its national sound, global inter-diasporic connections were forged, cultivating decolonized contact zones in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.[71]

[70] Riddim is the Jamaican patois word for "rhythm," referring to the instrumental accompaniment of a song. It follows a distinctive structure (riddim + melody + vocal part sung by the DJ) and is foundational to Caribbean popular music styles including dancehall, reggae, calypso, soca, grime, and reggaetón (Hebdige 1987; Brewster and Broughton 2014).

[71] Meehan 2009.

Intercultural exchange proliferated, as evidenced by the significant involvement of West Indians in the formation of the American Black Power and Civil Rights movements. West Indian activists and ideologies shaped Black Power assertions across the African diaspora. Despite occasional tensions, the shared liberation goals of Afro-West Indians and African Americans constituted a transcendent Black transnational project. African diaspora scholar Carol Boyce Davies's intersecting circles model provides a useful theoretical framework for visualizing the inherent connections among African diaspora communities across locales with shared colonial and slave trade histories.[72]

Scholars such as Kevin Meehan and Horace Campbell situate Rastafarianism within the broader twentieth-century Black liberation nexus, highlighting its ideological overlaps with Afrocentrism, Pan-Africanism, and Black Power in rejecting Eurocentrism, promoting Black pride, and invoking pre-colonial African civilizations. Drawing on social movement theory,[73] Campbell situates Rastafarianism within a wider matrix of radical anti-colonial politics in the Caribbean and Africa—exemplified by Walter Rodney and the Black Power movement—characterizing it as an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist formation.[74] He further contends that Rastafarianism demonstrates the power of cultural resistance and the importance of Afrocentric identity in struggles against racism and imperialism, representing the agency of oppressed Black people in crafting new forms of resistance.

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[72] Davies 1994.

[73] Social movement theory examines how and why collective action emerges to challenge social and political systems, typically emphasizing the roles of identity, resources, and political opportunity structures (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982).

[74] Campbell 1987.

In *People Get Ready* (2009), Meehan argues that cultural decolonization is central to national liberation and social change in the Americas.[75] He contends that artists such as Bob Marley and Curtis Mayfield, whose music embodied the anti-imperial, liberatory struggle, embraced Garvey's vision—asserting a global Black identity in songs like Marley's "One Love" (1965) and Mayfield's "People Get Ready" (1965)—and thereby influenced the Black nationalist vision articulated by the U.S. Black Power movement.[76] Meehan's counter-plantation framework reads the convergences of African American and Afro-Caribbean cultures as stemming from their connected plantation histories, while his One Love Solidarity model[77] proposes that their cultural unity can uplift historically oppressed American populations through mutually liberating collective goals.

Trinidad & Tobago's Afro-Indian Dichotomy

While Jamaica's sociopolitical and musical landscape has been shaped predominantly by its Afro-Caribbean majority and the Rastafari movement's Black nationalist vision, Trinidad and Tobago presents a fundamentally different case. The twin-island republic's history, politics, and cultural production—including its music—have been defined by a deep and enduring racial bifurcation between its two largest ethnic groups: Afro-Trinidadians of African descent, whose ancestors were forcibly brought to the islands as enslaved laborers , and Indo-Trinidadians of South Asian descent, whose forebears arrived from the Indian subcontinent as indentured

[75] Meehan 2009.

[76] Campbell 1987; Meehan 2009.

[77] Meehan's One Love Solidarity framework posits that cultural unity between African American and Afro-Caribbean communities can uplift historically oppressed populations in the Americas through collaboration toward mutually liberating social goals (Meehan 2009, 3, 36-37).

workers, following the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834.[78] Understanding this Afro-Indian dichotomy is essential for contextualizing the emergence and cultural significance of Trinibagonian music styles—particularly calypso and soca—as sites of both ethnic assertion and transcultural negotiation.

Trinidad and Tobago's demographic composition distinguishes it from most other Caribbean nations. According to the country's 2011 Population and Housing Census, East Indians comprise approximately 35.4% of the population, persons of African descent 34.2%, those of mixed heritage (other than African/Indian) 15.3%, and those of mixed African and Indian ancestry—locally termed "dougla"—7.7%.[79] This near-parity between the two dominant groups has produced what M.G. Smith identified as a plural society characterized by deep cultural differentiation: a condition in which two or more distinct cultural traditions coexist within a single political unit, maintaining separate family structures, religious institutions, languages, and belief systems, with integration occurring primarily through a shared economic system and state apparatus rather than through genuine social cohesion.[80] As Smith observed, the division between East Indian and Black-mixed elements in Trinidad and British Guiana is "deeper and sharper" than comparable divisions elsewhere in the British Caribbean—a structural distinction rooted in the fundamentally different conditions under which these communities arrived in the region.[81]

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[78] Smith 1965; Premdas 1996.

[79] Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office 2012.

[80] Smith 1965, 14.

[81] Smith 1965, 75.

The origins of this cleavage lie in the colonial plantation economy. Enslaved Africans had been forcibly transported to Trinidad beginning in the late eighteenth century, particularly after Spain's 1783 Cédula de Población attracted French planters and their enslaved laborers to the island. They underwent a process of cultural rupture and creolization, developing new, syncretic identities, languages, and religious practices that blended West African, European, and indigenous Caribbean elements.[82] Upon emancipation in 1834, formerly enslaved Afro-Trinidadians largely abandoned plantation labor, moving into urban centers and occupying positions in the civil service, clerical work, and the professions. To fill the resulting labor vacuum on sugar and cocoa plantations, the British colonial government initiated a system of Indian indentureship between 1845 and 1917, importing approximately 144,000 workers—primarily from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh—under contractual terms that, while nominally voluntary, bore considerable resemblance to the coercive conditions of slavery.[83] Unlike their Afro-Trinidadian counterparts, Indo-Trinidadian communities arrived with their cultural institutions largely intact—Hindu and Islamic religious practices, Hindi and Bhojpuri languages, caste structures, and musical traditions—and maintained a degree of cultural insularity reinforced by their concentration in rural agricultural communities in central and southern Trinidad.[84]

This historical divergence produced what Premdas termed a condition of "bipolar dominance": a sociopolitical arrangement in which two ethno-cultural blocs of roughly

[82]Brereton 1981.

[83] Laurence 1994; Manuel 2000.

[84] Smith 1965; Manuel 2000.

equivalent demographic weight compete for political power, economic resources, and cultural legitimacy within a single state.[85] The consequences of this arrangement became particularly acute during the movement toward national independence. Eric Williams, the historian and political theorist who founded the People's National Movement (PNM) in 1956 and led Trinidad and Tobago to independence in 1962, articulated a vision of national unity that sought to transcend racial divisions, famously declaring in his 1961 Woodford Square address that "Massa Day Done" and envisioning a post-colonial order in which all Trinidadians would participate as equal citizens regardless of ethnic background.[86] Yet the PNM was widely perceived as a predominantly Afro-Trinidadian party, and Williams's rhetoric of non-racialism was met with deep skepticism among Indo-Trinidadians, many of whom viewed the emergent political order as one that privileged Afro-Creole cultural norms—including the English language, Christianity, and Carnival—as the de facto standards of national belonging while marginalizing Indian cultural practices as foreign or insufficiently "Trinidadian."[87]

As Premdas argued, "creolization" itself became a hegemonic instrument: one that elevated the cultural practices of the Afro-Creole community as the measure of membership and national entitlement, disadvantaging Indo-Trinidadians despite their substantial economic contributions and longstanding presence in the society.[88] The political landscape calcified along racial lines. The PNM dominated government from independence in 1962 through the 1980s, while Indo-Trinidadian political representation coalesced around opposition parties—first the

[85] Premdas 1996, 15.
[86] Ryan, 1972; Williams 1961.
[87] Premdas 1996, 22–25.
[88] Premdas 1996, 28.

Democratic Labour Party (DLP), later the United National Congress (UNC)—producing what political scientist Selwyn Ryan documented as a "winner-take-all" electoral system in which voting patterns tracked ethnic allegiance with striking consistency.[89] Ryan demonstrated that neither party could secure a national electoral victory without the overwhelming support of its core ethnic constituency, rendering every general election a census-like referendum on racial identification.[90]

Religious demography further deepened the communal divide. Afro-Trinidadians are predominantly Christian, their practice encompassing Roman Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, and Spiritual Baptist traditions, as well as Afro-Caribbean syncretic practices such as the Orisha (Shango) faith. Indo-Trinidadians are religiously diverse, with approximately half identifying as Hindu, a significant minority as Muslim, and others as Presbyterian or Catholic—the latter two being products of nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian and Catholic missionary activity among Indian communities.[91] According to the 2011 census, Hinduism constituted 18.2% and Islam 5.0% of the national religious landscape, making Trinidad and Tobago one of the most religiously pluralistic nations in the Western Hemisphere.[92] These religious differences intersect with ethnic identity in politically volatile ways, particularly when demands for Hindi or Arabic instruction in schools, or for state recognition of Hindu and Muslim holidays, trigger broader anxieties about cultural assertion and resource allocation along ethnic lines.[93]

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[89] Ryan 1972.

[90] Ryan 1972; Ryan 2003.

[91] U.S. Department of State 2022.

[92] Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office 2012.

[93] Premdas 1996, 30–32.

This Afro-Indian dichotomy—at once demographic, political, religious, and cultural—has profoundly shaped Trinibagonian musical production and reception. As Guilbault argued in *Governing Sound* (2007), calypso and its musical offshoots have been uniquely enmeshed in projects of governance and in competing imaginations of nation, race, and diaspora, serving simultaneously as vehicles of Afro-Trinidadian cultural assertion, sites of state-sponsored national identity, and, increasingly, arenas in which Indo-Trinidadian voices have demanded inclusion and representation.[94] The emergence of soca in the 1970s must be understood within this context. Lord Shorty (later Ras Shorty I) did not merely fuse calypso with East Indian musical elements as an aesthetic experiment; his deliberate incorporation of Indian instruments—the dholak, tabla, and dhantal—and rhythmic patterns into what he called the "Soul of Calypso" was an explicitly political act aimed at bridging the Afro-Indian divide through musical synthesis.[95] Shorty's vision, articulated in songs such as "Indrani" (1973) and "Shanti Om," was that soca could serve as a sonic contact zone in which the two dominant cultures might find common ground—a musical enactment of the national unity that had proved so elusive in the political sphere.

The relationship between Indo-Trinidadian cultural production and the broader Trinibagonian musical landscape has nonetheless remained contested. Peter Manuel has documented how chutney—a musical form rooted in Bhojpuri folk songs, Hindu devotional music (*bhajans*), and wedding songs (*matkor* and *laawa*)—evolved from a private, community-

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[94] Guilbault 2007, 2–5.

[95] Lord Shorty explained that his incorporation of Indian instruments was intended to foster togetherness between Trinidad's African and Indian communities (See Ras Shorty I, interview, 1995; "Indrani," 7-inch single (Kingston: Doublends, 1973)).

based tradition into a public, commercialized genre during the latter half of the twentieth century, becoming a vehicle through which Indo-Trinidadians negotiated their cultural identity within a society where Afro-Creole norms dominated public cultural life.[96] The rise of chutney soca in the 1980s and 1990s, pioneered by artists such as Sundar Popo and Drupatee Ramgoonai, further complicated the cultural landscape: this hybrid genre simultaneously affirmed Indo-Trinidadian cultural distinctiveness and staked a claim within the Afro-Caribbean-dominated Carnival music economy.[97] As Guilbault observed, the increasing public prominence of chutney soca and ragga soca in the 1990s made audible the presence of heterogeneous constituencies and fundamentally redefined the terrain on which national culture is debated in Trinidad and Tobago.[98]

Understanding this sociopolitical landscape—the historical conditions that produced the Afro-Indian divide, its manifestations in electoral politics and religious life, and its complex entanglement with musical production—is critical for analyzing how Trinibagonian CPM styles function as sites of identity construction, both within the twin-island republic and in the diaspora. It is precisely because soca emerged from and continues to navigate this terrain of ethnic negotiation that it operates differently from Jamaican dancehall as a contact zone for transcultural identity formation among Afro-West Indian Americans. This is a distinction I will explore further in subsequent sections.

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[96] Manuel 1998; Manuel 2000.

[97] Sundar Popo's is credited as the "father of chutney soca" and his 1970 song, "Nana and Nani," is regarded as a foundational chutney recording and example of the early chutney soca sound along with Drupatee Ramgoonai's "Careless Driver" (1989) (Manuel 1998, 35–40).

[98] Guilbault 2007, 189.

METHODS

This dissertation emerged from a two-stage research design. Stage One consisted of an extensive multidisciplinary literature review and the construction of the project's theoretical apparatus. Stage Two (2024–2026) gathered ethnographic data through participant surveys, semi-structured interviews, and fieldwork conducted during New York City's 2024 and 2025 Carnival Weeks.The resulting evidentiary base is intentionally plural: narrative ethnography surfaces how Afro-West Indian Americans articulate and live their identity; quantitative demographic analysis maps the urban infrastructure within which that identity is sustained; carnival fieldwork documents the public performance of diasporic belonging; and a multidisciplinary literature review situates these strands within broader scholarly conversations.

Ethnography

The ethnographic component centers on five focal participants recruited under three eligibility criteria: self-identification as Afro-West Indian or Caribbean American, demonstrated connection to or membership in New York City's Afro-West Indian community, and active engagement with Caribbean popular music styles such as dancehall and soca.

Interviews

Recruitment proceeded through personal and professional networks; participants are friends, family members, and first-degree connections of the principal investigator, a positionality I treat throughout as analytically generative rather than as a confound. All five focal participants are

women raised in New York City; they range in age from 28 to 70 and trace heritage to Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Grenada (including Carriacou), and St. Lucia. Initial interviews ran 45–60 minutes; follow-up sessions of 30–45 minutes were requested where additional material was needed. Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom depending on geographic proximity, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed through a combination of automated transcription and manual verification.

Transcripts were analyzed thematically against the Pluralized Identity framework. All participants are referred to by pseudonym throughout the dissertation; locations, dates, and institutional names have been anonymized except where preservation of detail is essential to the analysis and doesn't compromise confidentiality. Interview recordings and transcripts are stored on a password-protected external hard drive accessible only to the investigator. Per the study's IRB-approved review-period protocol, participants were given the opportunity to review their materials, indicate any content to be excluded from the write-up, and request copies of their recordings and transcripts.

Participant Survey Form

A supplementary online survey produced six written responses, two from interview participants and four from additional community members drawn from first-degree networks. All respondents are women; ages range across the four recruitment brackets (18–30, 31–43, 44–57, 58–70), and island affiliations include Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Grenada, St. Lucia, and multi-island combinations such as "Trini Lucian." The survey was organized in three parts — background information, eligibility screening, and open-ended response questions on childhood

and adolescent musical memory, present-day listening practice, and what participants describe when asked to locate "home." Where survey and interview accounts converge, I read the convergence as supporting; where they diverge, I treat the divergence as analytically productive.

Fieldwork

The carnival fieldwork—approximately twenty hours of observation across the 2024 and 2025 New York Carnival Weeks—produced video recordings, photographs, promotional materials including flyers and event posters, and detailed field notes.

Datasets

U.S Census and Public Records

The demographic component draws on three U.S. Census Bureau data products and one municipal source. ACS five-year estimates for 2006–2010, 2011–2015, and 2017–2021 supply the longitudinal picture of West Indian population change in New York City. ACS one-year estimates for 2024 supply the most recent figures. The 2020 Decennial Census Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristics File A (DHC-A) provides the most granular national-origin breakdown available, including Neighborhood Tabulation Area–level data critical to the demographic analysis that follows. NYC Department of City Planning datasets supplied the foreign-born population composition figures and confirmed neighborhood-level patterns. Data retrieval, cleaning, table construction, and the generation of the choropleth maps and demographic visualizations that appear throughout the Introduction were conducted using Python-based pipelines and Claude.ai-assisted workflows.

Songs and Playlists

The musicological analysis proceeds along two complementary axes. The first is participant-driven: some interview participants generated personal playlists representing the music they associate with childhood, adolescence, and present life. These playlists, accessed and analyzed through the Spotify API, surface patterns of taste, artist preference, and inter-island musical exchange that the interviews alone could not. The second axis is the case study of dancehall artists Shenseea and Stefflon Don in Chapter 3, which examines two songs—"Be Good" (2021) and "Clockwork (feat. Spice)" (2022)—through close reading of lyric, sonic texture, and performance, situating each within the global music industry as a decolonizing contact zone. Together these methods support the dissertation's central argument that Caribbean popular music does not merely reflect diasporic identity already formed but participates in producing it.

CARIBBEAN POPULAR MUSIC (CPM) & THE DIASPORA

The CPM styles central to this discussion—Trinibagonian soca and Jamaican dancehall—are each, in distinct ways, vehicles of cultural preservation. Both are Afro-Caribbean music styles derived from West and Central African drumming rhythms and polyrhythms, and the resemblance between them is not coincidental but historical: kaiso, Trinidad's earliest Afro-Caribbean music form, spread through interregional migration across the Anglophone Caribbean, seeding the musical grammars that would later crystallize into soca on one side and into the ska-rocksteady-reggae-dancehall lineage on the other. What follows traces these parallel genealogies—not to argue they are the same music, but to show that the distance between them is shorter than island nationalism typically admits.

This section provides a genealogy of the two anglophone CPM styles central to this dissertation—Trinibagonian soca and Jamaican dancehall—tracing each from its earliest African-derived antecedents through its contemporary forms. It begins in Trinidad and Tobago, where kaiso—a chant rooted in West African musical practices brought to the islands by enslaved Ibibio and Igbo peoples—gave rise to calypso, a genre born of resistance and intercultural exchange between enslaved Africans and French migrant workers during the colonial period. The section follows calypso's evolution from patois-language songs performed by griots to the English-language social commentary of the modern calypsonian, before examining Lord Shorty's invention of soca in the early 1970s as a deliberate fusion of calypso with East Indian musical

elements, Caribbean genres such as reggae and zouk, and cadence rampa—a synthesis intended to reignite youth interest in traditional calypso while bridging the Afro-Indian cultural divide.

Turning to Jamaica, the section traces a parallel lineage from the non-Christian Kumina tradition—a Kongo-derived religious and musical practice whose drumming and rhythmic structures directly informed the emergence of secular popular music on the island—through mento's fusion of African and European folk elements, the rise of ska in Western Kingston's sound system culture, and the subsequent development of rocksteady and reggae. It culminates with dancehall's emergence in the late 1970s as a locally oriented counterculture that broke from reggae's international orientation, adopted Jamaican patwa as its primary language, and channeled the social upheaval of post-independence Jamaica into a genre that would achieve global reach by the early 2000s. Throughout, the section demonstrates how both soca and dancehall function as sites of sonic resistance and embodied cultural practice—music styles shaped by colonial legacies, anti-colonial movements, and the transcultural exchanges that define Caribbean musical production.

Sonic Resistance & Embodied Practices in Trinibagonian Music

Kaiso

Kaiso traces its origins to West Africa, with particular roots in present-day Nigeria; the Kingdom of Kongo in Central Africa, encompassing what is now northern Angola; the western region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo; the Republic of Congo; and the southernmost reaches of

Gabon.[99] Historians and Caribbean scholars broadly concur that kaiso was introduced to the Caribbean through the forced migration of enslaved Ibibio and Igbo West Africans, brought to the sister islands of Trinidad and Tobago to labor on sugar cane plantations during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[100] According to Douglas Chambers, the Ibibio and Igbo influence on kaiso is evident both in the name itself[101]—which derives from the Ibibio language—and in the distinctive musical practices that define the style.

Despite their enslavers' efforts to suppress communication in native tongues, the enslaved population gathered regularly in spaces that fostered singing and dancing. Kaiso served as the chant accompanying what is now recognized as limbo dancing: participants took turns bending beneath a bar suspended between two poles, the bar lowered progressively with each pass.[102] Those not dancing would chant "kaiso, kaiso, kaiso"—a phrase that translates roughly as "go forward," "go ahead," or "more."[103] Over time, kaiso became the name of Trinidad and Tobago's first popular music style, defined by singing, chanting, drumming, and dancing. This form of kaiso is the direct precursor to calypso, from which soca emerged and whose influence—carried across the Caribbean by interregional migration—contributed to the development of ska and its successors, reggae and dancehall, alongside Jamaica's own indigenous musical traditions.

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[99] M'Bokolo 1995; Fryer 2000.

[100] Chambers 2005; Quevedo 1983.

[101] Scholars believe the word "kaiso" has both Ibibio and Efik origins. In the Ibibio language, "ka" means "go" and "iso" means "forward," yielding the translation "go forward." With an exclamation mark, kaiso can further be rendered as "get on," meaning "bravo!" or "let us join" (Warner-Lewis 1991).

[102] Chambers 2005.

[103] Chambers 2005.

Calypso & Soca

The Trinidadian music style known as calypso—referred to in its earliest manifestations as "carisos"[104]—emerged in the seventeenth century. It evolved from kaiso and canboulay music[105] carried to Trinidad and Tobago by both enslaved Africans and French migrant workers from the French Antilles[106] in the wake of the Cedula of Population of 1783.[107] Although these practices are rooted in Ibibio and Igbo cultural traditions, they became entangled with the practices of other enslaved African communities, giving rise to a new multicultural slave culture across the region.[108] Calypso thus functioned from its inception as a form of resistance, enabling enslaved people to mock their enslavers and communicate covertly in plain hearing.[109]

Many early calypso songs were sung in Trinidadian French Creole, or patois, by a griot—the West African figure of the oral historian and storyteller—a practice that reflects the considerable influence of French migrants on the island even while it remained under Spanish colonial authority.[110] As the music form developed and Trinidad and Tobago transitioned from Spanish to British colonial rule in 1797, calypso migrated into English. Simultaneously, the griot

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[104] Carisos is a Trinidadian word meaning "old-time calypsos."

[105] Canboulay was a sugar cane harvest festival characterized by drumming, singing, chanting, and dancing, and is considered the direct predecessor of Trinidadian Carnival. Its name is a creolization of the French "cannes brulée," meaning burnt cane (Roaring 2005[1985]; De Ledesma and Popplewell 2000).

[106] The French Antilles comprises Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada.

[107] Quevedo 1983; Hill 2006[1993]; Roaring 2005[1985].

[108] Chambers 2005.

[109] Roaring 2005[1985].

[110] Trinidad became a Spanish colony in 1530 when Antonio Sedeño was appointed governor and tasked with establishing a settlement on the island. Following the British invasion of 1797 and the swift surrender of governor José Maria Chacón, Trinidad became a British colony, a status formalized under the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. The colonization of Tobago proved considerably more difficult. The island changed hands repeatedly as successive settlement attempts failed: the Dutch in 1628, the Netherlands again in 1629 and 1632, Poland in 1637, 1639, and 1642, and England in 1642, 1647, and 1649. It was not until 1654 that both the Dutch and Polish simultaneously established viable colonies on the island.

figure transformed into the chantuelle, or chantwell, and eventually into the calypsonian.[111] The modern forms of calypso and Carnival did not emerge until after the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834 and the subsequent emancipation of the enslaved population. Calypso has nonetheless preserved its function as a vehicle for musical protest and sociopolitical commentary, a tradition that extends unbroken into soca.

Soca[112] is a comparatively recent development in Trinidadian music, emerging in the early 1970s. Originally conceived as the "Soul of Calypso"[113] by its originator, Lord Shorty,[114] soca fused kaiso and calypso with cadence rampa,[115] alongside Caribbean genres such as reggae and zouk, and drew equally from the rhythmic vocabulary of East Indian musical traditions, including chutney. Indian instruments such as the dholak, tabla, and dhantal appear prominently in early soca recordings.[116] In a 1995 interview, Lord Shorty explained that soca was conceived as a means of revitalizing interest in traditional calypso among younger generations while simultaneously countering the growing popularity of Jamaican reggae and American soul and funk on the islands. Soca is unusual among Caribbean popular music styles in that it draws with relative parity from both Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean musical traditions. As its popularity expanded in the late twentieth century, soca progressively displaced calypso as the dominant

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[111] Quevedo 1983; Cowley 2003[1996].

[112] Soca was originally spelled "sokah," an acronym for "Soul of Calypso." The current spelling emerged after a local newspaper misprinted the word in an early report on the genre.

[113] Lord Shorty's 1974 recording "Endless Vibrations" is regarded as the canonical early soca text, as it was the first song Lord Shorty himself categorized under the new genre label.

[114] Lord Shorty (a.k.a. Ras Shorty I) first rose to prominence with his 1964 calypso hit "Cloak and Dagger."

[115] Cadence rampa (also cadence/kadans) is a Haitian modern méringue and dance music form that gained wide Caribbean circulation in the 1960s, largely through the influence of Haitian saxophonist Webert Sicot.

[116] Lord Shorty's 1972 recording "Indrani" exemplifies the use of these instruments in the early soca sound.

music of Trinidadian Carnival.[117] Accordingly, many soca songs foreground Carnival themes and are oriented toward the dancefloor, even as the genre sustains the tradition of sociopolitical commentary inherited from its predecessors.

Sonic Resistance & Embodied Practices in Jamaican Music

Kumina

Unlike many of Jamaica's syncretic religious traditions, which fused African spiritual practices with Christianity as it spread among the enslaved population, Kumina stands apart as a non-Christian religious and musical tradition that honors African gods and explicitly identifies itself as African.[118] Its origins trace to Central Africa, specifically the Kongo people, and the practice was brought to Jamaica by enslaved Africans of Kongo descent as well as Central African indentured laborers who arrived on the island after emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century.[119] While other spirit cults in Jamaica, such as the Zion Way Baptist and Pocomania revival traditions, incorporated certain Christian beliefs, Kumina maintained a distinct separation from Christianity, a distinction that extended to its musical practices.[120]

The music of Kumina is markedly different from other Jamaican religious traditions. Kumina followers perform two categories of song: "bailo" and "country."[121] Bailo songs are sung

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[117] See the International Soca Monarch competition.

[118] Lewin 1968, 54.

[119] Lewin notes that drums made from stems with goat skins stretched across are used by Kumina groups in St. Thomas to this day, echoing the Arawak practice of fashioning drums from the hollow stem of the trumpet tree (Lewin 1968, 53).

[120] Lewin 1968, 54.

[121] Lewin notes that Kumina followers use two categories of song: "bailo," songs in English typically sung when there isn't much spirit possession; and "country," improvised songs in a language containing a large number of genuinely Congolese words, usually sung to appease or entertain the possessing spirits (Lewin 1968, 54).

in English and are typically performed when spirit possession is minimal, while country songs are improvised in a language containing a large number of genuinely Congolese words and are usually sung to appease or entertain the possessing spirits. Country songs are believed to be taught by the spirits only to those whom they possess, establishing a direct and inseparable link between the spiritual and musical dimensions of the practice. This distinction between the two song types reflects a broader characteristic of Kumina: the belief in the power of the dead to possess the living, in contrast to other Jamaican spiritual groups, in which possession is attributed solely to Christian powers.[122]

Drumming occupies a central role in Kumina ceremonies. Two types of wooden goatskin drums are used: the *kbandu* and the "playing cast."[123] Players straddle the drums to beat them, while another player sitting behind uses a "catta tick" to beat on the side of the drum. The *kbandu* maintains a steady foundational beat, while the playing cast varies its rhythm depending on which spirit is being invoked, underscoring the relationship between specific drum patterns and the spiritual entities they are meant to summon. Additional percussion instruments include the shaka (a grater-like instrument stroked with a bit of metal), triangles, and gourds filled with stones for shaking.[124]

Kumina songs feature a characteristic rhythm that accompanies distinctive shuffling and twirling dance movements. The melodies are often structured in short phrases using call-and-

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[122] Lewin 1968, 54.

[123] Lewin describes two types of wooden goat-skin drums: the *kbandu* and the 'playing cast.' Players straddle the drums to beat them, while another player sitting behind uses a 'catta tick' to beat on the side of the drum (Lewin 1968, 54).

[124] Other percussion instruments include the shaka (a grater-like instrument stroked with a bit of metal), the triangle, and gourds with stones for shaking (Lewin 1968, 54).

response or question-and-answer patterns, a musical structure that reinforces the communal and participatory nature of the ceremonies. Where Kumina practitioners communicate with the spirits through "country" songs, revival cultists communicate in "unknown tongues" comprised mainly of nonsense syllables improvised to tunes called cymbals, highlighting the distinct linguistic and musical identities of each tradition.[125]

Kumina's significance extends well beyond the religious sphere. As Lewin observed, the style and rhythm of the island's spirit cults, particularly Kumina and the revival traditions, directly informed the emergence of ska in Western Kingston,[126] making Kumina not only a vital site of African cultural preservation in Jamaica but also a foundational musical influence on the island's secular popular music traditions.

Mento

Jamaican mento is a style of folk music that predates and has greatly influenced both ska and reggae.[127] Often confused with calypso from Trinidad and Tobago, mento is a separate and distinct musical form, though the two share similarities rooted in their common African and European heritage.[128] Mento's roots can be traced to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when enslaved Africans and their descendants fashioned instruments, banjos, bamboo fifes, drums, and others, and fused African rhythmic patterns with the European musical traditions they encountered on the island.[129]

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[125] Lewin 1968, 54.
[126] Lewin 1968, 55.
[127] Garnice 2007; Neely 2008.
[128] Manuel, Bilby, and Largey 2016.
[129] Lewin 1968, 51.

Enslaved people serving in the households of their enslavers would have encountered European dance music played by instrumental groups: schottisches, jigs, polkas, waltzes, quadrilles, and even mazurkas. Over time, these tunes were handed down in villages and adapted by local musicians. While the European model remained recognizable in many of these tunes, Jamaican syncopations and arrangements substantially altered their character.[130] Village bands typically included drums, bamboo fife, guitar or banjo or homemade mandolin, homemade wind instruments such as trumpet or bamboo saxophone, fiddle, and rhumba box or bass fiddle. The rhumba box, a large mbira in the shape of a box that performers could sit on while playing, became one of mento's most distinctive instruments.[131] These bands' repertoires were expansive, encompassing old-time set dances, dances of African origin such as calembe and yanga, dances of Spanish origin such as the merengue, mentos, calypsos, and other popular dance tunes of the day.

Mento songs are known for their lighthearted, humorous, and sometimes risqué style, covering a range of subjects including everyday life, social commentary, and sexuality.[132] The genre reached the height of its popularity during the 1940s and 1950s. Jamaica's growing tourism industry during this period provided mento village bands a new outlet, entertaining at hotels, and hundreds of songs emerged, some being old folk tunes adapted with new words

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[130] Village bands were made up of varying types and numbers of instruments but usually included drums, bamboo fife, guitar or banjo or homemade mandoline, homemade wind instruments such as trumpet or bamboo saxophone, fiddle, and rhumba box or bass fiddle (Lewin 1968, 51).

[131] The melody was often played by one or two instruments at a time with vigorous rhythmic background from strummed instruments and rhumba box or bass fiddle and drums, while other instruments provided improvised harmonies (Lewin 1968, 51).

[132] Moskowitz 2006; Witmer 2006.

about various aspects of Jamaican life.[133] The influence of Trinidadian calypso was strongly felt during this period, with many songs drawing on the calypso style, rhythm, and lyrical conventions.[134]

Notable mento artists include Lord Flea, Lord Tanamo, Louise Bennett, and Harry Belafonte, who helped popularize Jamaican folk music internationally.[135] As mass entertainment media expanded and mechanization transformed both rural and urban life in Jamaica, however, mento's prominence waned.[136] The genre's decline nonetheless paved the way for the emergence of ska and the electrically amplified sound that would define the next era of Jamaican popular music. Mento's foundational influence persisted, with its syncopated rhythms, its fusion of African and European musical elements, and its tradition of social commentary remaining deeply embedded in the island's musical fabric.

Sound System Culture and Ska

Ska emerged in the late 1950s in Western Kingston, marking a pivotal moment in the history of Jamaican popular music. As Lewin observed, the popular dance and its music were obviously based on the style and rhythm of the island's spirit cults, particularly Kumina and the revival traditions.[137] Yet ska was not simply a secularization of religious musical practices. Its sound can

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[133] Lewin observes that Jamaica's growing tourist industry gave instrumental combinations of the village band type a new outlet—entertaining at hotels—and that hundreds of songs emerged during this period, some being old folk tunes sung to new words about various aspects of Jamaican life (Lewin 1968, 52).

[134] Lewin 1968, 52.

[135] Moskowitz 2006; Neely 2008.

[136] Lewin observed that mass entertainment media were fast removing the need for many folk music forms, and that mechanization and transistor radios were making work songs obsolete (Lewin 1968, 51, 55).

[137] Lewin writes: "So basic is the appeal of this type of music that recently a type of popular dance the 'ska' and its music, obviously based on the style and rhythm of these cults came into being in Western Kingston" (Lewin 1968, 55).

be understood as a fusion of the Jamaican folk style of mento with calypso, American jazz, and rhythm and blues, musical forms that Jamaicans encountered through radio broadcasts from the United States and through the island's growing sound system culture.[138]

The defining characteristics of the classic ska sound include the use of horns, a walking bassline often emphasized by piano, heavy syncopation, a guitar chop on the offbeats (known as the "skank"), and a fast, up-tempo rhythm.[139] Ska is a particularly instructive case study because, unlike calypso and soca, it is an offshoot of musical practices and traditions originating in Jamaica that later became intrinsic to the island's sociopolitical culture.[140] Where mento had found new life through the tourism industry, ska emerged from the urban centers of Kingston, particularly the working-class neighborhoods of Western Kingston, and became closely tied to Jamaica's independence movement in 1962, serving as a sonic expression of national identity during a period of immense social and political transformation.

The transition from mento to ska reflected broader changes in Jamaican society. As Jamaica's rural population increasingly migrated to urban centers in search of economic opportunity, the acoustic village-band sound of mento gave way to the electrically amplified, horn-driven energy of ska.[141] This shift was facilitated by the sound system culture that had taken root in Kingston's working-class neighborhoods, where DJs and selectors played imported American records alongside locally produced music at outdoor dances. As local musicians began

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[138] Moskowitz 2006; Manuel, Bilby, and Largey 2016.

[139] Chang, O'Brien, and Chen 1998.

[140] Unlike calypso and soca, which emerged from practices originating in Trinidad and Tobago, ska is an offshoot of musical traditions originating in Jamaica that later became intrinsic to the island's sociopolitical culture.

[141] Lewin 1968, 52; Neely 2008.

recording their own music, ska became the island's first homegrown popular music style to achieve widespread commercial success both domestically and internationally, setting the stage for the subsequent development of rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall.

Dancehall

Dancehall emerged between the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to a broader cultural and political shift in Jamaica. As the first popular music style to predominantly employ Jamaican patwa rather than Jamaican Standard English, dancehall represented a significant departure from the musical conventions established by its predecessors.[142] The adoption of patwa, alongside the use of riddims derived from early roots reggae tracks[143] and a sparser sonic texture compared to roots reggae, are defining characteristics of the early dancehall sound as heard in recordings from the late 1970s and early 1980s.[144]

The 1980 election of Edward Seaga as Prime Minister marked a pivotal moment in Jamaican history, shifting control of the government from the socialist People's National Party to the socially conservative Jamaican Labour Party.[145] This new administration sought to suppress social critique and commentary, including that expressed through dancehall. Government attempts to censor hypersexualized and explicitly political lyrics were the most visible

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[142] Jamaican Standard English was primarily used in earlier Jamaican music genres such as reggae and ska (Stolzoff 2000; Barrow and Dalton 2004).

[143] Early riddims (i.e., classical riddims) are riddims created by sampling instrumentals from songs, and were used in roots reggae, dub, and lovers rock. Their names derive from the song from which they were originally sampled. One of the earliest and most notable is the "Real Rock" riddim, created by producer Clement "Coxsone" Dodd for the instrumental reggae song "Real Rock," recorded by the Jamaican band Sound Dimension in 1967 and released as a single in 1968.

[144] "Zungguzungguguzungguzeng" (1982) by Yellowman (Winston Foster).

[145] The Jamaican Labour Party was known for cracking down on social critique and commentary, including dancehall, that many cultural practitioners engaged in (Barrow and Dalton 2004).

manifestation of this effort. Rather than suppressing the genre, however, censorship bolstered dancehall's popularity and accelerated its rise to mainstream success in Jamaica. The precarious social and political landscape within which dancehall emerged provides crucial context for understanding its appeal as a site for youth counterculture. Dancehall's themes, production, and target audience shifted away from the internationally oriented focus of reggae toward a locally oriented one, addressing issues that reflected the interests and concerns of lower-class Jamaicans: sexuality, violence, dancing, and the ongoing social and political upheaval facing the country.

As dancehall evolved, the introduction of digital instrumentation[146] into riddim production in the mid-1980s significantly altered the genre's sonic character.[147] The rhythms became faster, and much of the roots reggae sound and feel gave way to a more digitally constructed aesthetic.[148] By the 1990s, dancehall's popularity had spread beyond Jamaica's borders, driven in large part by the influence of Jamaican diasporic communities. The genre achieved international mainstream success in the early 2000s with the emergence of artists such as Sean Paul, who found significant crossover success in the United States. This new generation of

[146] Key digital instruments in this transition included the Casio Casiotone MT-40 electronic keyboard and the Oberheim DX drum machine (Manuel and Marshall 2006).

[147] Music scholars Peter Manuel and Wayne Marshall attribute the popularization of digital riddims to the release of Ian "Wayne" Smith's 1985 song "Under Mi Sleng Teng," widely recognized as the first song to use a fully computerized riddim. The riddim was composed by Noel Davey, Ian "Wayne" Smith, and Lloyd "King Jammy" James (Manuel and Marshall 2006).

[148] There are two types of riddims: classical and digital. Classical riddims were dominant until 1980, when digital riddims created using drum machines and synthesizers emerged. A key distinction is that digital riddims are largely original compositions, whereas classical riddims exclusively sample instrumental tracks from earlier songs.

dancehall artists ushered in yet another transformation of the genre's sound, one that continues to shape it to this day.[149]

Having provided an overview of the historical and cultural context surrounding the emergence and proliferation of Jamaican popular music styles, two of the most prominent Anglophone Caribbean popular music traditions circulating in New York City's Afro-Caribbean and West Indian community, the analysis now turns to Caribbean popular music as a site of Afro-Caribbean American identity formation and construction.

[149] "Temperature" (2005) by Sean Paul.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The Pluralized Identity Model & Imagined States

How Afro-West Indian American identity gets constructed in the diaspora depends on how Caribbean identity is constructed. As previously discussed, the Caribbean is a profoundly heterogeneous region, a fact that presents a persistent theoretical challenge when attempting to locate a coherent "Caribbean identity." Shared cultural identity typically requires a degree of homogeneity and group cohesion, precisely the characteristics that scholars such as Premdas and Benedict Anderson identify as absent from the Caribbean context. Nonetheless, Premdas' Caribbean identity model offers a productive framework for navigating this complexity by disaggregating Caribbean identity into four tiers: trans-Caribbean, regional, insular, and substate ethnonationalist.[150] Of these, the trans-Caribbean tier is most consequential for a theory of diasporic identity. Functioning as a hegemonic but inclusive identity, it embraces the notion of the Caribbean as an imagined state of being, one capable of generating cohesion precisely by de-emphasizing insular sociocultural differences.[151] This imaginary quality provides an important theoretical basis for understanding how diasporic communities living abroad sustain a meaningful connection to their ancestral homeland.

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[150] Ralph Premdas argues that because the Caribbean lacks both a settled geographical boundary and a unified cultural composition — multilingual, multiethnic, and multiracial — Caribbean collective identity is best understood as an imagined state of being that exists "wherever Caribbean peoples congregate in tropical and temperate parts of the world, in industrial and agrarian regions, among white and black communities anywhere and everywhere" (Premdas 1996).

[151] Premdas 1996.

Yet sociologist Donald Levine identifies meaningful limitations within Premdas' framework. In particular, Levine cautions that imposing an artificial conceptual grid on social life risks freezing inherently fluid realities into fixed typologies, thereby obscuring the nuances of individual lived experience that characterize liminal states such as personal identity.[152] To address this concern, I propose supplementing Premdas' trans-Caribbean identity with scholars who have theorized the constitutive role of the imaginary in cultural identity formation: Homi Bhabha, Édouard Glissant, and Salman Rushdie.

These four thinkers illuminate complementary dimensions of the imaginary's relationship to cultural identity. Bhabha conceives of cultural identity as perpetually in flux, formed within an unstable "Third Space of enunciation" located between fixed identity positions and enabling hybrid cultural formations that challenge essentialist categories.[153] Glissant similarly understands cultural identity as inherently fluid and celebrates the generative capacity of the imaginary to establish what he terms "Relation" and créolisation, envisioning non-hierarchical connections across cultures that produce unpredictable, emergent syntheses.[154] However, postcolonialist scholar Benita Parry cautions that both Bhabha and Glissant, in their privileging of imaginative hybridity, tend to underestimate the persistent asymmetries of power between cultures and the material consequences of marginalization, thereby narrowing the analytical purchase of hybridity for subordinated groups.[155] Rushdie's practice of magical realism, which

[152] Levine 1985, 11.

[153] Bhabha 2004[1994].

[154] Glissant 1997.

[155] Parry 2004.

foregrounds imaginative capacity as a means of challenging fixed cultural assumptions and illuminating fluid, unstable identities, offers a productive corrective to this tendency.[156]

Despite the tension between Premdas' more schematic approach and the anti-essentialist perspectives of Bhabha, Glissant, and Rushdie, it is important to recognize that an openness to fluid identities need not preclude acknowledgment of the ways in which identities crystallize around shared experiences of marginalization. Imaginative visions of cultural identity can be generative, but they must be balanced against an analysis of structural inequalities. In response to this methodological need, I propose a new framework that brings the amalgamated models described above into dialogue with M.G. Smith's plural societies framework, producing what I term the Pluralized Identity (PI) model: a robust, anti-essentialist imaginary framework designed to probe articulations of cultural fluidity, hybridity, synthesis, and identity. The PI model employs a both/and approach, simultaneously illuminating competing tensions within identity formation and contextualizing the importance of social labels and ethnic signifiers in expressing shared ancestry and denoting membership within a shared ethnocultural group.

Concretely, I propose applying the PI model to investigate how members of New York City's Afro-West Indian community use Caribbean popular music (CPM) as musical contact zones in which hybridized transcultural identities are constructed. Understanding the significance of shared group identities is equally essential for identifying and theorizing the Caribbean diaspora and its internal subsets, including Afro-West Indians and, more specifically, Afro-West Indian Americans. Accordingly, I argue that CPM styles such as Jamaican dancehall and

[156] During 1990.

Trinibagonian soca function simultaneously as essentialized ethnic markers and as musical contact zones through which diasporic identity is actively negotiated and expressed.

Scalar Mediated Transmission Framework

The Scalar Mediated Transmission (SMT) framework theorizes Caribbean popular music (CPM) as operating across three concentric, interdependent scales—immediate (personal), intermediary (communal), and peripheral (global)—each functioning simultaneously as transmitter of cultural fixity and mediator of communally embedded relational knowledge. I developed it alongside the Pluralized Identity (PI) model to explain how CPM performs the identity work that model describes. The scales differ in what they transmit and mediate, not in which function they perform.

The immediate scale transmits the listener's own musical memory forward—what they hold onto, what they hum, what they catch on the first bar—and mediates how the music registers in the body in any given moment. The intermediary scale transmits embodied cultural knowledge within the community—the lyrics everyone knows, the dance moves, the call-and-response—and mediates that knowledge's relational meaning through shared recognition and co-presence. The peripheral scale transmits the fixed markers of CPM—signature sounds, canonical artists, genre conventions—across geographies and generations, but does not merely carry that fixity: it mediates how those markers are heard through industry structures, diasporic flows, and transnational audiences.

Cultural fixity is the stable marker carried across time, space, and generations; it makes CPM durable, recognizable in the opening bars of a dancehall track to a listener in Kingston, Brooklyn,

London, or Toronto. Communally embedded relational knowledge is the situated meaning that exists only in the network of bodies, gatherings, and shared recognition; it makes CPM relational, letting one track mean one thing at a backyard barbecue, another at a crowded fete, another on a solitary car ride. In any act of listening, CPM is both at once.

Because both functions operate at every scale simultaneously, the scales are concentric rather than hierarchical. Transmission and mediation are not separable functions: they occur together at every scale. A tree model would fix cultural content at the root and branch it outward into context-dependent variation; SMT holds instead that fixity and relationality are co-constituted at every level—and that mutual constitution is what the concentric structure reflects.

This interdependence makes SMT diagnostic: disrupt one scale and the others falter with it. When migration, displacement, gentrification, or the closure of communal spaces severs a listener from the intermediary scale, the immediate scale loses both functions at once—nothing to carry forward, no relational context to make sense of the music—while the peripheral scale keeps transmitting but loses its anchor for that listener. Transmission without mediation registers not as the music's persistence but as its disappearance. The reverse holds too: rebuild the intermediary scale—through deliberate seeking, curated gatherings, return travel, or substitute configurations assembled across settings—and both functions partly recover at the immediate scale.

Consequently, the two frameworks do complementary work. The PI model theorizes what diasporic subjects construct; SMT, how CPM makes that construction possible. SMT names the scalar mechanisms for one cultural domain; the PI model names what they produce: pluralized identities that dominant U.S. racial and cultural taxonomies cannot describe. Together

they account for how Afro-West Indian New Yorkers construct, sustain, and—when conditions demand—rebuild Caribbean cultural belonging through musical practice.

Diasporic Convergences and Musical Contact Zones

Triple Identity Consciousness & Identification Through Mutual Recognition

To illuminate the complexity and multidimensionality of Afro-Caribbean American identity, I draw upon a comparative analysis of frameworks and theories pertaining to identity construction within the Caribbean diaspora. Central to this analysis is Yndia Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness framework,[157] which provides an essential point of orientation for contextualizing the intricate processes through which middle-class, second-generation Black Caribbean immigrants (MSGCI) develop and construct identity within diasporic convergences and contact zones.[158] Lorick-Wilmot argues that extending Du Bois' concept of racial dualism is analytically necessary, as double consciousness inadequately captures how the inter- and intra-diasporic journeys and transnational connections of MSGCI inform their articulation and expression of identity.[159]

Building upon this foundation, the concepts of relational knowledge and context-dependent spatial relationships further support the development of pluralistic identities. Relational knowledge foregrounds the ways in which discrete pieces of information are

[157] Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness framework adapts W.E.B. Du Bois' double consciousness theory and racialization by incorporating critical race theory and postcolonialism methodologies (Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 21–22).

[158] Lorick-Wilmot 2018.

[159] Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 21–22.

connected to one another and together contribute to a broader interpretive context.[160] Context-dependent spatial relationships, by contrast, presuppose a degree of relational knowledge and refer to the ways in which spatial positioning shapes social understanding.[161] These relational frameworks condition how one situates oneself within a social environment and provide a reference point for interpreting the behaviors that circulate within it.[162][163]

When these relational models are brought into dialogue with Peter Hulme's extended-Caribbean theory, they generate a foundation for understanding both the complex processes of diasporic identity formation and the role of CPM in facilitating cultural dialogue. Hulme's extended Caribbean, redefined as a cultural zone rather than a bounded geographic space, proposes a material starting point for African American and Caribbean cultural exchange.[164] Crucially, Anglophone Afro-West Indians living in diaspora must actively participate in the extended Caribbean if they are to sustain their identification as West Indians, and such pluralistic identities cannot develop in the absence of the mutual recognition of all parties involved.[165]

Diasporic Convergences and Decolonizing Contact Zones

James Clifford introduces the concept of diasporic convergence in his 1994 essay "Diasporas," proposing that diasporic groups converge and find common ground in contact zones:

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[160] Relational knowledge emphasizes the interconnected nature of information (Thagard 2010).

[161] This term adapts Stockfelt's language to examine the connection between spatial relationships, identity, and culturally dependent modes of listening.

[162] Henriques 2011.

[163] Rhodd-Lee 2022, 9.

[164] Hulme 1986.

[165] Hulme 1986.

intercultural spaces in which discrete diasporas, bearing different historical and experiential narratives of dispersion and displacement, interact, exchange resources, assert collective identities, and potentially build alliances.[166] Specifically, Clifford examines how globalization has accelerated the proliferation of contact zones occupied by historically disenfranchised and displaced communities, including indigenous peoples, immigrants, and refugees, in order to illuminate the fluid and heterogeneous nature of diaspora.[167]

Clifford's framework offers a productive intervention in two respects: it contextualizes the impact of globalization on the production and proliferation of inter-diasporic sites of transcultural engagement, and it underscores the importance of creolization processes to the construction of spaces in which hybridized diasporan identity formation can occur. Critics, however, have argued that his model obscures the asymmetrical power dynamics and social inequalities operative within contact zones by overemphasizing social harmony, thereby simplifying the range of ways in which pluralism manifests within diasporic formations.[168] Mary Louise Pratt's subsequent theorization of contact zones into a broader sociocultural framework offers a productive corrective to these limitations.

Pratt's model defines contact zones as spaces shaped by colonial encounter, in which peoples geographically and historically separated are brought into relation. Such interactions establish interlocking systems of understanding and ongoing social practices that participants must negotiate to navigate the "radically asymmetrical relations of power" produced by

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[166] Clifford 1994.

[167] Clifford 1994.

[168] Brubaker 2005; Braziel 2013.

structural inequalities and the intractable conflicts inherent to such spaces.[169] Kevin Meehan further develops this model by situating his interpretation of diasporic convergence within an explicitly antithetical relationship to Pratt. Where Pratt foregrounds colonial asymmetry, Meehan calls for exchanges within contact zones that promote "radically egalitarian power relations," challenging rather than reinforcing colonialist dynamics.[170] He notes that colonial and neocolonial encounters also feature forms of contact among diverse colonized peoples who struggle collectively toward greater self-determination, a distinction that displaces the radical asymmetries Pratt emphasizes as the defining feature of such spaces.[171] This distinction is illustrated concretely in my subsequent discussion of roots reggae and Rastafarianism.

Convergences and contact zones may also function as sites of counter-plantation cultures,[172] a concept that draws attention to the variety of techniques developed by enslaved workers, freedpeople, and indentured laborers to resist the plantation system and its metropolitan authorities, which are understood as essential for comprehending the process of social development in the Caribbean.[173] Meehan argues that counter-plantation culture can also be mobilized in the service of a bottom-up recovery of Black historical agency, as articulated in African American studies, and examines moments of convergence in which African American

[169] Pratt 1992, 6–7.

[170] Meehan 2009, 37–38.

[171] Meehan 2009, 37.

[172] Counter-plantation is an alternative hemispheric social organizational system proposed by Jean Casimir (Casimir 1992).

[173] Casimir 1992, 79.

and Caribbean people in the United States combine their energies toward collective liberation.[174][175]

Taken together, these frameworks illuminate the complex processes of diasporic identity formation and the role of cultural dialogue in sustaining and transforming identities within diasporic communities. They foreground the potential of decolonizing contact zones and counter-plantation cultures to foster collective liberation while simultaneously accounting for the persistent power imbalances and structural inequalities that shape these interactions. They also establish a point of departure from which to analyze the global music industry as a decolonizing contact zone in which the dynamics of diasporic convergence and the struggle for self-determination are continuously enacted.

By combining Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness framework, relational knowledge, context-dependent spatial relationships, the extended-Caribbean, and the concepts of diasporic convergence and contact zones, a comprehensive analytical approach to examining Afro-Caribbean American identity within a diasporic context emerges, one that is attentive to both the imaginative dimensions of identity and the material conditions that circumscribe its expression.

Sonic Embodiment & Cultural Pluralism

Chapter 3 presents a case study of dancehall artists Shenseea and Stefflon Don to illustrate how diaspora members use CPM to simultaneously construct and collapse discrete cultural

[174] Meehan 2009, 36.

[175] Meehan 2009, 37.

boundaries while embodying pluralism. These artists occupy varying sociocultural positions within dancehall and the global music industry, a space that functions as a decolonizing contact zone wherein diasporic convergence and the interplay between Jamaican and American popular music unfold.

The analysis draws upon multiple theoretical lenses from diaspora, trans-Atlantic, postcolonial, identity, and transcultural studies. Larisa Kingston Mann's embodied cognition framework demonstrates how dancehall's sonic characteristics, including polyrhythms, heavy bass, and patwa vocals, generate physical experiences that actively shape cultural identity formation. Sherri-Ann Butterfield's concept of selective acculturation reveals how diasporic communities strategically adapt cultural elements while preserving core identity markers. Hulme's extended-Caribbean maps transnational connections across geographic boundaries, while Meehan's decolonizing contact zones identifies spaces in which power dynamics are negotiated through cultural expression.

Together, these frameworks expose how female dancehall artists transform structural constraints into strategic resources for creative agency, employing sexual performance and linguistic flexibility to carve space within male-dominated transnational music industries while simultaneously challenging and reinforcing the boundaries of cultural authenticity. Applying Meehan's framework, global music industry spaces function as decolonizing contact zones in which power dynamics undergo continuous negotiation, and both artists employ strategic cultural code-switching to navigate spaces that privilege male-dominated narratives and Western musical sensibilities.

Mann's embodied cognition framework reframes this sexuality as lived physical experience rather than abstract concept. Dancehall's tradition of slackness offers a paradigm that embraces sexual agency over respectability politics, and within masculinist creative environments, overt female sexuality serves as a counter-hegemonic tool. For marginalized performers, defiant sexual performativity can generate the notoriety convertible into greater creative control. Yet anchoring legitimacy to essentialized, hypersexual images simultaneously risks creative pigeonholing and structural exploitation.

Convergences and contact zones also function as sites of counter-plantation culture, wherein resistance techniques become essential for understanding Caribbean social development. Meehan's framework suggests that counter-plantation culture can be implemented through a bottom-up recovery of Black historical agency, attending to moments in which African American and Caribbean peoples combine their efforts toward collective liberation. Understanding shared group identities thus becomes analytically indispensable for recognizing the Caribbean diaspora and its internal subsets, including Afro-West Indian Americans.

By integrating Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness, relational knowledge, context-dependent spatial relationships, the extended-Caribbean, and the concepts of diasporic convergence and contact zones, a comprehensive analytical approach to Afro-West Indian American identity within a diasporic context emerges. These frameworks collectively illuminate the strategies through which artists navigate the challenges and opportunities of the transnational music industry while asserting their agency and subverting dominant cultural narratives.

“LITTLE CARIBBEAN” & THE NEW YORK CITY WEST INDIAN COMMUNITY

This section maps the demographic and cultural infrastructure that sustains Caribbean popular music as a site for transcultural identity construction in New York City. Drawing on American Community Survey five-year estimates and 2020 Decennial Census data, it documents the scale, composition, and spatial distribution of the city's West Indian population—approximately 579,096 individuals by 2021, with Jamaicans, Guyanese, Trinidadians, and Grenadians constituting the largest national-origin groups. The section traces the community's settlement patterns across Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, with particular attention to the "Little Caribbean" corridor along Flatbush Avenue where a diverse array of West Indians coexist within a walkable geography, creating the multi-island transcultural enclaves in which the musico-cultural exchanges this dissertation examines take place. It also documents southeastern Queens's distinct Guyanese-dominated settlement zone, Crown Heights's role as the staging ground for the West Indian American Day Carnival, and the community's demographic crossroads—an aging immigrant generation alongside a rapidly growing native-born cohort whose relationship to the Caribbean is increasingly mediated through cultural practice rather than direct migration experience.

The section then turns from demographic infrastructure to the cultural practices that animate these spaces, examining how island-of-origin affiliations, identity construction, and cultural performance intersect with the material registers of food, music, and visual aesthetics to produce and sustain West Indian belonging. It documents the fundamental tension between

Caribbean immigrants' island-based ethno-national identities and the American racial classification system, exploring how West Indian New Yorkers engage in what Vickerman characterizes as "tweaking a monolith"—strategically maintaining ethnic distinctiveness within a society that offers limited vocabulary for the heterogeneity of Black experience. Through participant survey data woven alongside the scholarly literature, the section illustrates how second-generation Caribbean Americans navigate what Lorick-Wilmot terms "triple identity consciousness"—simultaneously negotiating racial, ethnic, and class identities—and how CPM, food, carnival, and visual markers such as national flags operate as vectors of cultural transmission, community belonging, and transcultural exchange across generations and across national-origin boundaries.

Demographic Breakdown

Annual Population Trends: Population and Generational Transformation

The contours of this community are not static. American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates reveal a trajectory of modest growth followed by contraction: the West Indian population in New York City rose from approximately 590,630 in 2010 to 604,758 by 2015, before declining to 579,096 by the 2017–2021 estimate period.[176] This arc reflects a confluence of factors: shifting immigration pathways as U.S. policy tightened, secondary migration to suburban communities on Long Island and in New Jersey, and, most significantly for this project, the maturation of a U.S.-born generation whose relationship to the Caribbean is increasingly

[176] U.S. Census Bureau 2012; 2017; 2023a.

mediated through cultural practice rather than direct migration experience. It is this generation—raised on dancehall and soca yet rooted in American urban life—that constitutes the primary subject of the musico-cultural analysis in subsequent chapters.

Beneath this aggregate picture, the four largest national-origin groups followed markedly different paths. The Jamaican population, the city's largest single West Indian group, grew steadily from 216,495 to 223,954 (a 3.4% increase), while the Guyanese community expanded more rapidly, rising from 107,972 to 127,351 (18.0%). The smaller Grenadian community also experienced notable growth, from 17,465 to 20,279 (16.1%). The Trinidadian and Tobagonian population, by contrast, contracted from 76,240 to 71,731, a 5.9% decline.[177] These divergent trajectories suggest that the economic conditions, immigration networks, and generational dynamics shaping West Indian settlement operate unevenly across national-origin communities—a reality that carries significant implications for understanding how transcultural exchange unfolds within specific neighborhoods and how Caribbean popular music circulates across island-origin boundaries.

Table 1. *West Indian Population in NYC by National Origin, 2010–2021*

National Origin	2010	2015	2021	Change	% Change
West Indian (all)	590,630	604,758	579,096	-11,534	-2.0%
Jamaican	216,495	218,783	223,954	+7,459	+3.4%
Guyanese	107,972	122,828	127,351	+19,379	+18.0%
Trinidadian & Tobagonian	76,240	75,660	71,731	-4,509	-5.9%
Grenadian	17,465	17,468	20,279	+2,814	+16.1%

Source: *U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B01003 (2006–2010, 2011–2015, 2017–2021).*

[177] U.S. Census Bureau 2012; 2023a.

Composition and Representation

The popular characterization of Caribbean New Yorkers as recent immigrants still adjusting to American life obscures a more complex reality. By 2021, 37.3% of the city's West Indian population (216,097) was native-born, a reflection of the maturation of a second and third generation raised in neighborhoods like Flatbush, Crown Heights, and Jamaica, Queens, where the sounds and social institutions of the Caribbean are as much a part of daily life as the surrounding American urban landscape (see Table 2).[178] This native-born cohort has grown steadily, from 186,974 in 2010 to 216,097 in 2021, a 15.6% increase that has outpaced the growth of the foreign-born population and, consequently, reshaped the community's relationship to both the United States and the Caribbean.[179]

Situated within the national landscape, Holder and Bonnett's analysis of 2011–2013 census data documents 1,402,699 West Indians in the United States, with Jamaicans accounting for fully half of that total—a national pattern that mirrors the Jamaican plurality observed in New York City (see Table 3).[180] The population is multiracial in character, comprising Black West Indians alongside a significant Indo-West Indian segment whose presence shapes the terms of transcultural musical exchange across the diaspora.

Among the foreign-born, naturalized citizens constituted the largest segment at 246,889 (42.6%), while non-citizens numbered 103,158 (17.8%). The high naturalization rate is characteristic of West Indian immigrants, who have historically demonstrated strong civic

[178] U.S. Census Bureau 2023b.

[179] U.S. Census Bureau 2012; 2017; 2023b.

[180] Holder and Bonnett 2019, 29.

engagement, a pattern that has made this community a significant, if underexamined, political force in city and state politics. Notably, the Guyanese community's native-born population showed the most dramatic growth of any national-origin group during this period, rising from 26,806 in 2010 to 38,557 in 2021, a 43.8% increase that signals a community rapidly establishing itself across generations in the city.

Table 2. Nativity and Citizenship, West Indian Population in NYC, 2021

National Origin	Native-Born	Naturalized	Non-Citizen	Total	% Native
West Indian (all)	216,097	246,889	103,158	566,144	38.2%
Jamaican	77,551	100,134	41,818	219,503	35.3%
Guyanese	38,557	64,437	22,383	125,377	30.8%
Trinidadian & Tobagonian	25,978	30,593	14,289	70,860	36.7%
Grenadian	5,389	10,559	4,132	20,080	26.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B05001 (2017–2021).

Table 3. Native-Born West Indian Population Growth, NYC, 2010–2021

National Origin	2010	2015	2021	Change	% Change
West Indian (all)	186,974	206,654	216,097	+29,123	+15.6%
Jamaican	66,431	74,749	77,551	+11,120	+16.7%
Guyanese	26,806	35,380	38,557	+11,751	+43.8%
Trinidadian & Tobagonian	20,569	24,365	25,978	+5,409	+26.3%
Grenadian	4,362	4,803	5,389	+1,027	+23.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table B05001 (2006–2010, 2011–2015, 2017–2021).

The 2020 Decennial Census, through its Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristics (DHC-A) data product, offers the most granular portrait of this community to date. The Census Bureau enumerated 349,193 West Indian residents across New York City, a figure that, while lower than the ACS estimates (which capture ancestry and include second-

generation respondents), provides the most detailed national-origin breakdown available (see Table 4).[181] Jamaicans constituted more than half of this total at 194,481 (55.7%), followed by Trinidadians and Tobagonians at 58,382 (16.7%), and a substantial "West Indian (unspecified)" category of 35,237 (10.1%), comprising individuals who identify broadly with the West Indies without specifying a single national origin. Smaller but culturally significant communities—Barbadians (16,344), Grenadians (13,283), Vincentians (7,224), St. Lucians (6,578), and Antiguans and Barbudans (5,461)—round out a diaspora whose internal diversity is a defining feature of what Smith would recognize as a pluralistic social formation, and one that is central to the transcultural dynamics this dissertation examines.

Table 4. *West Indian Population in NYC by National Origin, 2020 Census*

National Origin	Population	% of WI Total
West Indian (total)	**349,193**	**100.0%**
Jamaican	194,481	55.7%
Trinidadian & Tobagonian	58,382	16.7%
West Indian (unspecified)	35,237	10.1%
Barbadian	16,344	4.7%
Grenadian	13,283	3.8%
Vincentian	7,224	2.1%
St. Lucian	6,578	1.9%
Antiguan & Barbudan	5,461	1.6%
Dominica Islander	2,073	0.6%
Kittian & Nevisian	1,885	0.5%
U.S. Virgin Islander	1,376	0.4%
Bahamian	1,111	0.3%
British Virgin Islander	145	0.0%

[181] U.S. Census Bureau 2023g. Figure reflects all West Indian/Caribbean-origin responses excluding Haitian.

Anguillan	106	0.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census DHC-A, Table T01001 (Alone or in Any Combination). Excludes Haitian-origin responses.

Borough Demographics

The story of West Indian New York has long been, in large part, a story about Brooklyn. From the mid-twentieth-century waves of Caribbean migration through the post-1965 boom, Brooklyn's central and eastern neighborhoods—Flatbush, East Flatbush, Crown Heights, Canarsie—have served as the primary port of arrival and settlement for West Indian immigrants, functioning as the receiving communities where, as the migration literature suggests, chain migration networks concentrate co-nationals in geographically proximate areas. That pattern persists: in 2020, Brooklyn housed 178,070 West Indian residents, followed by Queens (153,319), the Bronx (82,087), Manhattan (18,190), and Staten Island (6,303) (see Table 5).[182]

Yet the distribution is shifting in ways that complicate any singular narrative of West Indian Brooklyn. Queens's West Indian population has grown substantially, driven largely by the Guyanese community, which now numbers 54,962 in the borough, nearly double the Guyanese population of Brooklyn (28,903). In the Bronx, a substantial Jamaican population (56,003) concentrates in the northern reaches of the borough, in neighborhoods like Eastchester-Edenwald-Baychester and Williamsbridge-Olinville—areas that rarely feature in popular or scholarly discussions of Caribbean New York but which nonetheless sustain their own musico-cultural ecosystems. These patterns reflect both the escalating cost of housing in Brooklyn's gentrifying neighborhoods and the distinct migration chains that have historically connected

[182] U.S. Census Bureau 2023g

specific Caribbean nations to specific New York neighborhoods, a geographic specificity that, as I argue throughout this dissertation, shapes the terms under which transcultural musical exchange occurs.[183]

Table 5. West Indian Population by Borough and National Origin, 2020 Census

Borough	WI Total	Jamaican	Trinidadian	Guyanese	Barbadian	Grenadian
Brooklyn	178,070	71,525	32,613	28,903	10,719	11,177
Queens	153,319	55,154	17,357	54,962	3,017	1,265
Bronx	82,087	56,003	4,188	8,614	1,439	435
Manhattan	18,190	9,154	2,814	1,621	918	309
Staten Island	6,303	2,534	1,319	764	278	129
NYC Total	**437,969**	**194,370**	**58,291**	**94,864**	**16,371**	**13,315**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census DHC-A (Alone or in Any Combination). Sum of named West Indian national-origin groups; excludes Haitian.

Neighborhoods and Transcultural Enclaves

The demographic patterns outlined above acquire their fullest meaning in the specific neighborhoods where West Indian New Yorkers live, work, worship, and make music. These neighborhoods are not merely residential clusters demarcated by census tracts; they are transcultural enclaves where, as a result of the colonial legacies and migration patterns described above, the inhabitants comprise what Smith described as a 'multitude of ethnic and racial identities,' creating an ecosystem in which racial and cultural pluralities proliferate and the conditions for musico-cultural exchange and evolution are continuously reproduced.

[183] U.S. Census Bureau 2023d; 2023g

"Little Caribbean": Brooklyn's Caribbean Corridor

The cluster of neighborhoods along and around Flatbush Avenue in central Brooklyn—encompassing Flatbush, East Flatbush, Crown Heights, and Prospect Lefferts Gardens—constitutes the cultural and demographic heart of West Indian New York. Officially designated "Little Caribbean" by the New York City Council in 2017, this area has served as a primary destination for West Indian immigrants since the post-1965 migration wave and remains the densest concentration of multi-island Caribbean settlement anywhere in the United States.[184] The designation is particularly apt for this project because it captures something the census data alone cannot: the way these neighborhoods function not as discrete national-origin enclaves but as shared Caribbean spaces where Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Guyanese, Grenadians, Barbadians, and others coexist within a walkable geography, creating precisely the conditions for transcultural exchange that this dissertation documents.

The 2020 Census provides the empirical foundation for this characterization. Across the eight Neighborhood Tabulation Areas (NTAs) that comprise this zone, approximately 68,399 West Indian residents live within a total population of 415,765, meaning roughly one in six residents identifies with West Indian heritage (see Table 6).[185][186] The population is notably diverse in its national origins: Jamaicans (30,432), Trinidadians and Tobagonians (15,906), Guyanese (10,996), Grenadians (5,830), Barbadians (4,619), Vincentians (2,033), and St. Lucians (2,014). Along Flatbush, Church, and Nostrand Avenues, Caribbean bakeries, record

[184] NYC Council designation, 2017. Boundaries roughly encompass the NTAs of Flatbush, East Flatbush (Erasmus, Farragut, Rugby, Remsen Village), Crown Heights (North and South), and Prospect Lefferts Gardens-Wingate.
[185] U.S. Census Bureau 2023g.
[186] Figure excludes Haitian-origin responses.

shops, and restaurants form an unbroken cultural corridor where the sonic landscape shifts between dancehall, soca, calypso, and reggae. This living soundscape embodies the pluralistic character of the West Indian diaspora and provides the acoustic backdrop against which the identity negotiations this project examines take place.

Table 6. West Indian Population in "Little Caribbean" NTAs, 2020 Census.

NTA	Total Pop	W.I. Total	Jamaican	Trinibago	Grenada	Barbados
E. Flatbush-Rugby	42,762	10,954	5,174	2,228	1,240	669
E. Flatbush-Remsen Village	39,115	9,968	4,854	1,623	1,159	674
Crown Heights (North)	85,275	9,150	3,129	2,343	697	1,083
E. Flatbush-Erasmus	47,690	8,922	3,999	2,275	799	552
Flatbush	66,503	8,474	3,859	2,258	495	274
E. Flatbush-Farragut	34,317	7,262	3,604	1,777	451	444
Prospect Lefferts Gardens	49,513	7,126	2,990	1,889	574	464
Crown Heights (South)	50,590	6,543	2,823	1,513	415	459
Combined Total	**415,765**	**68,399**	**30,432**	**15,906**	**5,830**	**4,619**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census DHC-A (Alone or in Any Combination). Excludes Haitian-origin responses. Sorted by WI Total (descending).

Southeastern Queens: Jamaica, Queens, "Little Guyana," and Beyond

Southeastern Queens represents the second major West Indian settlement zone in New York City, though its character differs markedly from Brooklyn's. Encompassing the NTAs of Jamaica, South Jamaica, St. Albans, South Ozone Park, Richmond Hill, and surrounding neighborhoods, this corridor's combined West Indian population totals approximately 51,971 across a total population of 465,393 (see Table 7).[187][188]

[187] U.S. Census Bureau 2023g.

[188] Excludes Haitian-origin responses.

What distinguishes this zone is its demographic composition. While Brooklyn's Little Caribbean features a relatively even distribution among national-origin groups, southeastern Queens is defined by a pronounced Guyanese concentration. The Guyanese community numbers 36,534 across this zone, with the highest concentration in South Ozone Park (15,191), a neighborhood that, along with adjacent Richmond Hill and South Richmond Hill, has become the de facto "Little Guyana" of North America. Here, roti shops, Hindu temples, mosques, cricket grounds, and a robust cultural infrastructure reflect both the Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean character of Guyanese society, a pluralistic composition that, as Smith observed, is a defining feature of Caribbean social life and that produces its own distinctive modes of musico-cultural expression and exchange.

Jamaicans form the second-largest group at 27,319, concentrated in St. Albans (8,372), Rosedale (4,767), and Laurelton (4,549), historically Black middle-class neighborhoods where homeownership and civic institutions have long anchored community life. The Trinidadian community (9,214) is more dispersed but maintains notable presence in South Ozone Park (3,237). The proximity of these settlements to Jamaica's commercial center and Long Island Rail Road hub creates an interconnected West Indian geography extending across southeastern Queens, one that, while perhaps less culturally visible than Little Caribbean, sustains its own networks of musico-cultural exchange and community formation.

Table 7. West Indian Population in Jamaica/Queens NTAs, 2020 Census

NTA	Total Pop	W.I. Total	Jamaican	Trinibago	Guyanese	W.I. (unsp.)
St. Albans	51,816	10,941	8,372	1,096	—	—
South Ozone Park	79,540	10,170	985	3,237	15,191	—
Rosedale	27,101	5,869	4,767	580	—	—

Laurelton	26,088	5,842	4,549	630	—	—
Queens Village	54,345	5,822	3,202	637	4,270	—
South Jamaica	44,401	5,085	3,079	976	2,916	—
Jamaica	60,993	3,001	1,018	662	3,506	—
S. Richmond Hill	24,141	2,051	134	676	3,689	—
Richmond Hill	34,100	1,339	227	323	2,076	—
Jamaica Estates	23,576	1,033	581	189	—	—
Jamaica Hills	39,292	818	405	208	—	—

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census DHC-A (Alone or in Any Combination). Excludes Haitian. — = data not reported or suppressed. Sorted by West Indian (WI) Total (descending).

Crown Heights and Flatbush

Crown Heights and Flatbush warrant particular attention because of their outsize significance as sites of West Indian cultural production and transcultural exchange. Crown Heights has been the staging ground for the West Indian American Day Carnival, commonly known as the Labor Day Parade, since the event relocated from Harlem to Eastern Parkway in 1969. Drawing between one and three million participants and spectators annually, the parade is one of the largest cultural events in North America and the most visible expression of West Indian identity in the United States—a mass-scale performance of Caribbean belonging that crystallizes many of the transcultural dynamics this dissertation examines.[189]

The 2020 Census reveals the demographic infrastructure that sustains this cultural life. Crown Heights North houses 9,150 West Indian residents within a total population of 85,275, while Crown Heights South contains 6,543 among 50,590.[190] The diversity of national origins is particularly striking: Jamaicans (5,952 combined across both sections), Trinidadians (3,856),

[189] The parade route runs along Eastern Parkway from Schenectady Avenue to Grand Army Plaza.

[190] U.S. Census Bureau 2023g.

Barbadians (1,542), Grenadians (1,112), and St. Lucians (680) all maintain significant presence. It is this multi-island coexistence that creates what I would characterize as a transcultural contact zone: a space where, as a result of geographic proximity and shared diasporic experience, the boundaries between national-origin cultures become porous and the conditions for musico-cultural exchange become a feature of everyday life.

Flatbush proper, centered along Flatbush Avenue between Parkside Avenue and Avenue H, houses 8,474 West Indian residents within a population of 66,503. When combined with the four East Flatbush NTAs, this zone's West Indian population totals roughly 45,580, a concentration that sustains one of the most vibrant Caribbean commercial corridors in the diaspora. East Flatbush-Rugby leads with the highest West Indian concentration (10,954), including 5,174 Jamaicans and 1,240 Grenadians, among the highest Grenadian concentrations anywhere in the United States. Remsen Village follows at 9,968 and contains the largest Vincentian cluster in the city (600).

These are the neighborhoods where the sonic environments described in this dissertation's fieldwork take physical form: the dancehall sessions along Flatbush Avenue, the soca fetes in Crown Heights event spaces, the sound system gatherings in East Flatbush parks. The dense West Indian population documented here produces the critical mass necessary for the maintenance, transmission, and transformation of musico-cultural traditions across generations and across national-origin boundaries, creating the conditions for the transcultural identity construction this project examines.

Community Profile: Transcultural Settlements and Sonic Geographies

The age structure of New York City's West Indian population reveals a community at a demographic crossroads (see Table 8). With a median age of 42.4 years, higher than the citywide median, the population skews older, its center of gravity resting in the prime working years: the 25–34 cohort (83,325, or 14.4%), the 45–54 cohort (82,086, or 14.2%), and the 35–44 cohort (75,604, or 13.1%).[191] At the same time, those aged 65 and older (98,572, or 17.0%) nearly equal the under-18 population (103,425, or 17.9%), a demographic reality that signals an aging community whose founding immigrant generation is entering retirement even as its U.S.-born children and grandchildren establish their own households, identities, and, as this dissertation argues, their own musico-cultural practices.

The community's gender composition is notably female-skewed: women comprise 56.1% of the total (324,856) compared to 43.9% male (254,240), producing a sex ratio of 78.3 males per 100 females (see Table 9). This pattern, consistent across West Indian communities in the diaspora, reflects the historically central role of women as primary migration initiators—the mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who established the footholds that enabled subsequent family reunification, a gendered migration pattern well-documented in the Caribbean migration literature. The citizen voting-age population stands at 378,321, a substantial civic bloc whose political potential remains largely untapped.

Table 8. *Age Distribution, West Indian Population in NYC, 2021*

Age Group	Population	% of Total
Under 5	28,011	4.8%
5–9	26,515	4.6%

[191] U.S. Census Bureau 2023e.

10–14	30,806	5.3%
15–19	29,518	5.1%
20–24	34,887	6.0%
25–34	83,325	14.4%
35–44	75,604	13.1%
45–54	82,086	14.2%
55–59	47,022	8.1%
60–64	42,750	7.4%
65–74	59,565	10.3%
75–84	27,913	4.8%
85+	11,094	1.9%
Total	**579,096**	**100.0%**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table DP05 (2017–2021). Median age: 42.4 years.

Table 9. *Key Demographic Indicators, West Indian Population in NYC*

Indicator	Value
Total population	579,096
Median age	42.4 years
Female (%)	56.1% (324,856)
Male (%)	43.9% (254,240)
Sex ratio (males per 100 females)	78.3
Under 18 (%)	17.9% (103,425)
65 and older (%)	17.0% (98,572)
Citizen voting-age population	378,321

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table DP05 (2017–2021).

Household composition further underscores the centrality of family structures within this community. Of the roughly 220,170 West Indian households citywide, 151,923 (69%) were family households, a figure reflecting the multigenerational co-residence patterns and strong

kinship networks that have long characterized Caribbean settlement in the city.[192] The Guyanese community maintained the highest share of family households at 79%, with only 8,587 nonfamily households, a pattern consistent with the multigenerational living arrangements that define Guyanese settlement in Queens and that create the intergenerational domestic spaces in which Caribbean popular music is transmitted from parents and grandparents to children.

Table 10. Household Composition by National Origin, NYC, 2021.

National Origin	Family HH	Nonfamily HH	Living Alone	Total HH	% Family
West Indian (all)	151,923	68,247	62,985	220,170	69%
Jamaican	57,049	28,219	24,512	85,268	67%
Guyanese	32,867	8,587	7,447	41,454	79%
Trinidadian & Tobagonian	20,071	9,918	8,809	29,989	67%
Grenadian	6,455	2,723	2,489	9,178	70%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, Tables B11001 and B11002 (2017–2021).

The residential histories reported by participants corroborate the borough-level patterns documented in the census data above. All six survey respondents grew up in New York City, and their settlement patterns reflect the concentration of West Indian communities in Brooklyn and Queens that has defined Caribbean migration to the city since the post-1965 wave.[193]

Brooklyn was the dominant borough of origin: five of six participants—Colette, Teresa, Blake, Tanya, and Angelica—grew up there, while Tanya and Blake also reported residence in Queens. Blake's residential history was the most geographically dispersed, spanning Brooklyn (Brownsville), Manhattan (Harlem), and Queens (Springfield Gardens), a pattern reflecting the

[192] U.S. Census Bureau 2023f.

[193] U.S. Census Bureau 2023a.

secondary migration dynamics in which West Indian families move across borough lines in response to housing costs and family networks. Paula grew up in Far Rockaway, Queens, whose Caribbean population sustains its own musico-cultural ecosystem rooted in Jamaican traditions.

Only Tanya currently resides in New York City, maintaining residence in Flatbush, the heart of Little Caribbean. The remaining five have relocated: Teresa to Atlanta; Paula to Newburgh, New York; Blake abroad; Colette and Angelica elsewhere. This outmigration mirrors the broader contraction documented in the ACS data, in which the city's West Indian population declined from 604,758 in 2015 to 579,096 by the 2017–2021 estimate period.[194] Yet as subsequent sections demonstrate, participants' cultural identification with Caribbean New York persists well beyond physical departure, sustained through music, food, and diasporic memory.

The specific neighborhoods participants grew up in reveal a pronounced concentration within the Little Caribbean corridor. Colette grew up in East Flatbush; Teresa in Canarsie and Flatbush; Tanya in Jamaica, Queens, and Flatbush; Angelica in East Flatbush and Flatlands, all neighborhoods that sustain among the highest concentrations of multi-island West Indian settlement in the United States.[195] Paula grew up in Far Rockaway, and Blake's trajectory through Brownsville, Harlem, Bellport, Wyandanch, and Springfield Gardens traces a residential arc spanning multiple boroughs and the suburban periphery, a pattern increasingly common among Guyanese families in the region.

Participants' descriptions of neighborhood music confirm that these spaces functioned as the transcultural enclaves the demographic data suggests, spaces where, as Smith observed,

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[194]U.S. Census Bureau 2023a.

[195] Figure reflects all West Indian/Caribbean-origin responses excluding Haitian (U.S. Census Bureau 2023g).

racial and cultural pluralities proliferate and the conditions for musico-cultural exchange are continuously reproduced. Teresa recalled growing up amid "Hip Hop / Rap or songs from all the Caribbean countries," noting "many people throughout the diaspora." Angelica described "lots of dancehall" from "speakers, cars, at people's homes—pretty much 24/7 especially during summer and holidays." Paula similarly described a Far Rockaway soundscape of "Caribbean music—reggae, calypso, dancehall, soca" played from "cars with the loud speakers, radios, some stores" at "any celebratory occasion." Tanya noted "hip-hop, rap, and dancehall" played "from cars or barbecues," while Blake described Caribbean popular music and rap "played loudly out of someone's car," "outside a Caribbean restaurant, or for block parties put on by the local health center."

These accounts reveal how Caribbean popular music operates not merely as personal entertainment but as an assertion of cultural ownership over urban space — a sonic territorialization that transforms streets, storefronts, and public gathering places into what I conceptualize as musical contact zones.[196]

[196]Meehan 2009, 118.

IDENTITY & CULTURAL PRACTICES

New York City's Caribbean diaspora isn't merely a demographic footnote in the city's immigration history; it is a formidable cultural force that has reshaped the social, political, and sonic landscape of all five boroughs. Since 1965, more than half a million West Indians have settled in New York City[197] a population roughly twice the size of Barbados and five times that of Grenada. By the late 1990s, nearly one-third of the city's Black population was foreign-born West Indian, and when second-generation descendants are included, roughly two-fifths of New York's Black residents trace their origins to the West Indies.[198]

The significance of this population extends well beyond its size. Sutton and Chaney argue that Caribbean life in New York City is the product of continuous circular movements of people, capital, material goods, cultural practices, and ideas between the Caribbean and the United States. It is a dynamic that cannot be explained in economic or political terms alone but must also be understood through its cultural manifestations. Rather than assimilating into the existing social fabric, West Indian New Yorkers have, in Sutton and Chaney's formulation, "Caribbeanized" the city, maintaining a tenacious mosaic of cultural communities differentiated by race, language, class, and nationality.[199]

This section synthesizes findings from the scholarly literature on cultural representation and identity in New York City's Caribbean and West Indian community alongside data gathered from participant surveys. Organized around two thematic clusters, cultural representation and

[197] Foner 2001, 1.
[198] Foner 2001, 3–4.
[199] Sutton and Chaney 1987.

identity on the one hand, and cultural practices and artifacts on the other, the analysis examines how island affiliations, identity construction, and cultural performance intersect with the material practices of food, music, and visual aesthetics to produce and sustain West Indian belonging in the diaspora. Throughout, I situate these dynamics within the broader framework of Locating "Home," which examines how Caribbean popular music facilitates pluralistic identity construction in New York City's West Indian diaspora.

Cultural Representation & Identity

Island Affiliations

Island-of-origin affiliations constitute one of the most fundamental organizing principles of Caribbean diasporic life in New York City. While mainstream American racial discourse collapses the heterogeneity of Caribbean-descended peoples into the monolithic category "Black," within the community itself, the question of which island one's family hails from remains a primary marker of social identity. Crowder and Tedrow's analysis of residential settlement patterns demonstrates the extent of this island-specific community formation: Jamaicans comprised the largest share at 38.7 percent of the West Indian population in 1980, followed by Haitians at 15.8 percent, Trinidadians and Tobagonians at 8.8 percent, and Guyanese at 6.6 percent. By 1990, the Guyanese share had nearly doubled to 11.7 percent, reflecting shifting migration streams while underscoring the durability of island-based enclaves across the city.[200]

[200]Crowder and Tedrow 2001, 87.

These affiliations have deep institutional roots. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Caribbean women in New York established island-specific mutual aid societies that maintained direct ties to home-island communities. The Danish West Indian Ladies Aid Society (later renamed the American Virgin Islands Ladies Aid Society) and the British Virgin Islands Benevolent Association organized fundraising campaigns, remittance networks, and advocacy efforts on behalf of political self-governance in the home territories.[201] These organizations also operated rotating credit associations, an economic practice transplanted directly from the Caribbean, that reinforced island-based social bonds while pooling resources for collective advancement.[202]

By the post-1965 period, island-specific organizational life had expanded considerably. New York-based Vincentian organizations, for instance, initiated development projects on the home island, including a hall for Carnival celebrations funded entirely by immigrant savings, while simultaneously cosponsoring calypsonians and entertainers from St. Vincent, thereby sustaining cultural circuits that connected island life to diasporic cultural production.[203] The Vincentian International Cultural Alliance of Brooklyn pursued explicitly transnational goals: enhancing the educational and cultural life of Vincentians in both New York and St. Vincent through cultural fairs, newsletters transmitting news from home, and the sponsorship of island entertainers.[204]

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[201]Watkins-Owens 2001, 44–46.
[202]Watkins-Owens 2001, 44.
[203]Basch 2001, 130–132.
[204]Basch 2001, 131.

For second-generation Caribbean Americans, island affiliations are sustained not through formal organizational membership but through transnational family networks, periodic return visits, and the sensory rituals of daily life. Lorick-Wilmot recalls Saturday morning trips to purchase Caribbean baked goods from the Vincentian-owned Alan's Bakery on Nostrand Avenue in Brooklyn, participation in the annual West Indian Day Parade on Eastern Parkway, and listening to radio station 1190 AM WLIB for news from the Caribbean as experiences that anchored Caribbean identity to specific places, sounds, and tastes within the city.[205] Her informant Robert, whose parents emigrated to Cambria Heights, Queens, captures the affective dimension of this attachment when he describes Brooklyn as a place where the streets feel and smell like the inside of one's house, where a grandmother's cooking emanates from the kitchen and soca blasts from a double-parked car with a country-flag medallion hanging from the rearview mirror.[206]

The barrel trade further reinforces these material connections: approximately 66 percent of West Indian migrants annually ship barrels filled with clothing, food, and household goods to family members in the Caribbean.[207] One barrel sent by a Trinidadian domestic worker in the 1980s contained nearly eight hundred dollars' worth of goods, including three gallons of cooking oil, forty pounds of rice, and twenty pounds of detergent.[208] These transnational circuits of goods, capital, and kinship ensure that island-of-origin identities remain salient even as West Indian New Yorkers navigate the complexities of diasporic life.

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[205]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 68–69.
[206]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 73.
[207]Basch 2001.
[208]Foner 2001, 10.

The participant cohort reflects this multi-island composition while illustrating the enduring salience of island-of-origin identification. Three participants claimed Jamaican heritage: Colette, whose parents immigrated from Jamaica; Paula, who identified as "Jamaican"; and Tanya, who identified as "Jamaican American." Teresa identified as Trinibagonian and St. Lucian, describing herself as a "Trini Lucian." Blake identified as Guyanese through her mother's immigration. Angelica identified as Grenadan, specifying heritage from Carriacou, a small island whose diasporic community maintains a significant presence in East Flatbush, where the 2020 Census documented among the highest Grenadian concentrations in the United States.[209] All six affirmed membership in the African diaspora and connection to New York City's Caribbean and West Indian community.

Their self-identifications ranged from single-island designations ("Jamaican," "Grenadan") to hyphenated formulations ("Jamaican American," "Caribbean-American") to more inventive constructions: Colette coined "Jamaican-American twice removed," while Teresa offered "Trini Lucian." These formulations echo Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness framework, in which island affiliation persists as a primary organizing principle even as it is inflected by American racial categorization and diasporic experience.[210]

[209]U.S. Census Bureau 2023g.

[210] Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness framework extends Du Bois's double consciousness by arguing that middle-class, second-generation Caribbean immigrants must simultaneously navigate racial, ethnic, and class identities (Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 21–22).

Identity Construction

The construction of West Indian identity in New York City is shaped by a fundamental tension: the encounter between Caribbean immigrants' island-based ethno-national identities and the American racial classification system that categorizes all people of African descent as "Black." Upon arrival, immigrants discover that their ethnic distinctiveness, so central to self-understanding in the Caribbean, is frequently subsumed under an undifferentiated racial label. Crowder and Tedrow observe that West Indian immigrants face a unique constellation of barriers, challenges, and advantages in navigating this landscape.[211] Vickerman characterizes the resulting negotiation as "tweaking a monolith," the process by which West Indians work to reshape rigid American racial categorization from within.[212] Sutton and Chaney frame this resistance more forcefully, arguing that Caribbean communities have not merely resisted assimilation but have actively absorbed other cultures, functioning as "unmeltable ethnics" who defy the American melting-pot ideology altogether.[213]

This negotiation produces strategic identity practices. The intentional maintenance of ethnic markers, including dress, speech patterns, and the establishment of residential enclaves, functions as a mechanism for preserving the distinction between West Indian and African American identities.[214] Rogers explores the political dimensions of this distinction, documenting the tensions and affinities that characterize Afro-Caribbean and African American relations in the

[211] Crowder and Tedrow 2001, 83.
[212] Vickerman 2001.
[213] Sutton and Chaney 1987.
[214] Crowder and Tedrow 2001, 86.

city.[215] The strategic assertion of ethnic difference isn't rooted in anti-Black sentiment but in a desire to maintain cultural specificity within a racial system that offers limited vocabulary for expressing the heterogeneity of Black experience in America.

For the second generation, identity construction becomes considerably more layered. Waters demonstrates that second-generation West Indians exhibit significant variation in how they position themselves along the spectrum between Caribbean and African American identification, with gender, class, skin color, and peer-group context all shaping outcomes.[216] Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness framework extends Du Bois's concept of double consciousness by arguing that middle-class, second-generation Caribbean immigrants must simultaneously navigate racial identity (as Black Americans), ethnic identity (as Caribbean-descended people), and class identity (as middle-class professionals).[217]

This tripartite consciousness plays out in the everyday. Lisa, a physician of Jamaican and Panamanian parentage in Lorick-Wilmot's study, describes returning to New York after years in Chicago precisely because the city's Caribbean infrastructure made it possible to feel connected in ways unavailable elsewhere.[218] Robert insists that being Caribbean involves more than eating the foods and listening to music: it is culture, pride in the history, and expressing it to everyone who knows you.[219]

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[215] Rogers 2001.
[216] Waters 2001.
[217] Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 21–22.
[218] Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 75.
[219] Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 73.

Identity construction in Caribbean New York isn't unidirectional. Some scholars speak of the “West Indianization” or “Caribbeanization” of Black New York, as Caribbean cultural norms, musical preferences, and linguistic practices that reshape the broader Black community.[220] Brooklyn's African American teenagers have incorporated Jamaican dancehall music into their repertoire and begun imitating Jamaican patois; what this means for African Americans and for Black identity in general, Kasinitz observes, is among the least researched but potentially most important aspects of contemporary Black immigration to New York.[221] Caribbean cultural identity in the city is thus not merely defended against American assimilation pressures; it actively transforms the cultural landscape it inhabits.

National Identity and the Negotiation of Dual Heritage

Participants' self-descriptions of national identity illuminate the negotiations between Caribbean and American identification that define the second-generation experience.[222] Their formulations ranged from unequivocal island claims to ambivalent articulations of in-betweenness. Paula's response was straightforward: "Jamaican." As the eldest participant (58-70), her identification reflects the stronger island-of-origin attachment characteristic of the immigrant generation, reinforced by her assertion that Jamaica "will always be home." Tanya (31-43) identified as "Jamaican American," anchoring her heritage in "food, music, and traditions." Blake identified as "Guyanese American" but expressed uncertainty about whether her connection was to Guyana itself or to the family carrying that heritage.

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[220] Kasinitz 1992; Foner 2001, 19.

[221] Foner 2001, 19.

[222] Waters 2001.

The youngest cohort produced more inventive formulations. Colette described herself as "Jamaican-American twice removed," elaborating that she felt in many ways less connected to that heritage than she would prefer. Teresa offered "Caribbean American" or "Trini Lucian." Angelica chose "Caribbean-American," specifying heritage from "Carriacou, Grenada and the Caribbean in general, and being from Brooklyn and being a New Yorker," a formulation fusing island heritage with borough identity that resonates with the "New York Caribbean" concept described by several Chapter 3 interview participants.

The challenges of dual heritage surfaced with particular clarity. Colette called East Flatbush "a mini West Indies" from which she felt disconnected upon leaving, while simultaneously feeling unable to fully claim Jamaican identity, describing it as "a bizarre limbo-type space that I occupy." Teresa described frustration at being told she was "not Caribbean enough or not American enough." Tanya recalled childhood difficulty identifying with her heritage "because of the negative association with being Jamaican," a reference to the stereotypes Vickerman documents as part of how West Indians negotiate American racial categorization.[223] These accounts confirm that the unique constellation of barriers, challenges, and advantages Crowder and Tedrow identify is experienced as a lived reality with tangible emotional consequences.[224]

[223] Vickerman 2001.

[224] Crowder and Tedrow 2001, 83.

Cultural Performance

The most visible and spectacular expression of Caribbean cultural identity in New York City is the annual West Indian Day Parade, also known as the Eastern Parkway Carnival, held each Labor Day in Brooklyn. Established in 1969 by Carlos Lezama, a Black Venezuelan,[225] the event draws between one and two million attendees, making it the city's largest ethnic celebration.[226] The parade is a pan-Caribbean affair rooted in Trinidadian Carnival traditions but incorporating mas bands, steel pan orchestras, soca trucks, and participants representing the full spectrum of Caribbean island nations. Crown Heights became an important Caribbean cultural center in the United States largely because of the Carnival's presence on Eastern Parkway.[227] For decades the event was largely ignored by mainstream New York politics; by the late 1980s and 1990s, however, elected officials and candidates began competing for visibility along the route, a development reflecting both the growing political clout of the Caribbean community and the performative dimensions of West Indian identity assertion in the city.[228]

Meehan's analysis of Jayne Cortez's poem "Shaking Things Up" captures the sensory and political dimensions of the event.[229] Cortez renders the scene in vivid detail: youth in military fatigues, women braided and dreadlocked, revelers dressed as gladiators before soca bands. The governing trope is carnival itself, a Trinidadian-rooted but now pan-Caribbean tradition that Meehan reads as a decolonized contact zone, a space in which Caribbean peoples publicly

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[225]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 68.

[226]Foner 2001, 1–2.

[227]Kasinitz 1992, 55; cited in Olwig 2001, 148.

[228]Foner 2001, 3–4.

[229]Meehan 2009, 106–108.

perform collective identity, assert cultural presence within the urban landscape, and forge inter-island solidarities. Cortez links the Brooklyn crowd to the figure of Trinidadian activist John La Rose, dubbing him "Lord Political Activator" in the manner of calypsonians assuming sobriquets during Carnival season. The tradition of adopting creative masks for performances that carry political force is central to carnival culture, a practice that carnivalist writers and performers have carried forward into the diaspora as a vehicle for imagining social transformation.[230]

The carnival tradition also sustains the transnational cultural circuits that link Caribbean New York to the islands. Foner describes a Trinidadian steel drum master whose living arrangements span multiple countries and cities: home in Miami, where he leads a band for the Columbus Day carnival; winters in Trinidad during the main Carnival season; summers in California for work at Disneyland; and July and August in Brooklyn, preparing arrangements for the West Indian Carnival.[231] This itinerant pattern illustrates how carnival performance creates a continuous cultural circuit linking the Caribbean, New York, and other diasporic nodes. The entertainment industry provides channels for calypsonians and other performers to circulate between New York and the West Indies throughout the year, reinforcing the transnational social field that gives shape to diasporic cultural life.[232] The governments of Grenada and St. Vincent have even shifted their national Carnivals from the traditional pre-Lenten period to the summer months to accommodate diasporic participation, a development that underscores the degree to which the transnational social field reshapes homeland cultural calendars.[233]

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[230]Meehan 2009, 108.

[231]Foner 2001, 13.

[232]Basch 2001, 130.

[233]Basch 2001, 133.

Beyond the annual Carnival, cultural performance permeates everyday life in Caribbean neighborhoods. Lorick-Wilmot documents how second-generation Caribbean Americans engage in deliberate acts of ethnic self-fashioning, speaking parents' native dialects, preparing traditional foods, listening to Caribbean popular music, and participating in community cultural events.[234] Participants' accounts confirmed that these practices were not confined to the West Indian Day Parade but embedded in the rhythms of family gatherings, neighborhood barbecues, and domestic rituals.

Domestic gatherings constituted the most consistently cited sites of cultural performance. Teresa described music as a constant home presence, played "in the living room or kitchen, wherever most people were congregated," with her father listening on weekends while cleaning, transforming routine labor into cultural transmission. Colette encountered Caribbean music primarily at extended family functions ("summer BBQs, Christmas parties, wedding receptions") and at her uncle's house in Yonkers. Tanya identified "family functions" and "barbecues in the neighborhood." Angelica described music at "people's homes" and "parties with friends, especially summer and holidays."

Formal events anchored engagement beyond the family unit. Paula attended West Indian Day Parade concerts ("reggae night, pan night, calypso night") and neighborhood street fairs rooted in the Trinidadian Carnival traditions Meehan reads as decolonized contact zones.[235] Teresa attended Trinidad Carnival in 2025, reinforcing the transnational cultural circuits Foner

[234]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 73.

[235]Meehan reads the Eastern Parkway Carnival as a decolonized contact zone for the public performance of collective Caribbean identity (Meehan 2009, 106–108).

and Basch document.[236][237] Blake described block parties organized by a local health center and music outside Caribbean restaurants, modest but significant communal sites within the musico-cultural infrastructure of Caribbean neighborhoods. These accounts demonstrate that cultural performance in the diaspora operates across a continuum, from the spectacular public assertion of Carnival to the intimate domestic rituals through which heritage is transmitted across generations.

Cultural Practices & Artifacts

Authentic Cuisine & Food Markets

Food is among the most immediate and sensory registers through which Caribbean identity is expressed and sustained in the city. Caribbean bakeries, restaurants, and food establishments are central fixtures of West Indian neighborhoods, functioning simultaneously as commercial enterprises, community gathering spaces, and sites of cultural transmission. The food service sector represents a significant economic niche for West Indian workers, with extensive internal labor markets that allow Caribbean immigrants to advance within the industry.[238] The transnational dimensions of this food culture have deep historical roots: as early as the first decades of the twentieth century, handmade clothing and shoes traveled the Brooklyn-Barbados network alongside letters and remittances.[239]

[236]Foner 2001, 13.
[237]Basch 2001, 133.
[238]Model 2001.
[239]Watkins-Owens 2001, 29.

For the second generation, food operates as a key marker of ethnic authenticity. Robert evokes the sensory landscape of the Little Caribbean corridor in terms inseparable from cuisine: a place where the streets feel and smell like the inside of one's house, where a grandmother's cooking, the corner store shopkeeper's curiosity, children eating piraguas on the sidewalk, and men playing dominoes over rum all converge to produce Caribbean belonging.[240] The ability to prepare traditional dishes and recognize authentic flavors constitutes a form of cultural capital that signals genuine community membership, particularly important for a generation that may lack the accent, dialect fluency, or first-hand island experience of their parents.

The survey data corroborates the literature's identification of food as a primary register of Caribbean cultural expression. When asked which aspects of heritage they most identified with, participants overwhelmingly cited food alongside music. Paula identified "food and music." Tanya listed "food, music, and traditions." Teresa described "the music, the food, and the celebrations." Blake singled out "language and food" as her strongest Guyanese connections. Angelica offered the most expansive formulation: "food, music, communal gathering, mindsets," situating food within a broader ecosystem of cultural practice. Teresa's articulation of diasporic food preferences was particularly vivid: explaining what community membership meant, she framed her answer through culinary choices: "I'll pick a Roti over a burger. A currant roll over cake." These choices function as what Lorick-Wilmot identifies as deliberate acts of ethnic self-fashioning, conscious assertions of cultural affiliation expressed through everyday eating.[241]

[240]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 73.

[241]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 73.

Musical Soundscape

The musical soundscape of New York City's Caribbean neighborhoods constitutes one of the most powerful vectors of cultural identity and inter-diasporic exchange. Reggae, dancehall, soca, calypso, and kompa emanate from storefronts, sound systems, car stereos, and apartment windows, producing an auditory environment that is distinctly Caribbean even as it exists within the broader sonic fabric of the city. Lorick-Wilmot recalls the importance of Caribbean radio, specifically 1190 AM WLIB, as a medium that provided constant news updates from the Caribbean, anchoring diasporic listeners to island affairs and sustaining a transnational auditory commons.[242]

Caribbean music's presence in New York has deep historical roots. Calypso arrived in the city as early as 1912, when the Trinidadian musician Lovey (George Bailey) led a band to record for Victor and Columbia.[243] By the 1930s, calypsonians Atilla the Hun and the Roaring Lion were recording for the American Record Company in New York and appearing on NBC radio broadcasts. In 1939, Houdini was hosting late-night gatherings at halls on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, chronicling New York life in his 1940 Decca album Harlem Seen Through Calypso Eyes. The postwar period saw pan-Caribbean stage shows become a standard format in the city, culminating in the 1947 Broadway production Caribbean Carnival, which featured Trinidadian dancers and Haitian performers. By the 1950s, the Calypso Room and Le Cupidon nightclubs were hosting performers including Lord Flea and Maya Angelou, and Harry Belafonte's 1956 album Calypso sparked a national craze. Following the 1965 immigration reform, Brooklyn

[242]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 68.

[243]Stuempfle 2004.

emerged as a major center for calypso, with its own Caribbean recording companies and its massive Labor Day Carnival anchoring a performance circuit extending from the Caribbean to Brooklyn, Miami, Toronto, and London.

Meehan characterizes New York City as a "pivotal hub of decolonizing cultural contact," a site where Caribbean and African American musical traditions have intersected and cross-pollinated for over a century.[244] This dynamic is most dramatically illustrated by the emergence of hip hop. Brewster and Broughton document how Kool Herc, a Jamaican immigrant named Clive Campbell, founded hip hop in the Bronx by recreating a New York version of Kingston's sound system culture, importing practices like toasting (rapping) and the heavy emphasis on bass frequencies that would become defining elements of the genre.[245] Brooklyn already had pre-existing Jamaican sound systems, and hip hop's subsequent development drew on these Caribbean sonic practices alongside African American traditions.[246] Daynes underscores the broader diasporic significance of this migration, describing sound systems as one of the Black diaspora's most enduring cultural institutions.[247] Meehan traces the convergence further through Wyclef Jean, a Haitian immigrant who became a central figure in hip hop's evolution, bringing Caribbean musical sensibilities, particularly the influence of Bob Marley and reggae, into the mainstream of American popular music.[248] The entertainment industry provides channels for calypsonians and other musical performers to circulate between New York and the West Indies

[244]Meehan 2009, 118.
[245]Brewster and Broughton 2006, 240–242.
[246]Brewster and Broughton 2006, 242.
[247]Daynes 2010, 54.
[248]Meehan 2009, 175–178.

throughout the year, performing much the same music in both locations and reinforcing the transnational social field.[249]

For second-generation Caribbean Americans, musical preferences serve as both identity markers and sites of cultural negotiation. Lorick-Wilmot came of age during the 1980s amid what she describes as a rapid convergence between mass media and social commentary on the contemporary experiences of Black America, a period marked by the rise of Afrocentrism, the African black medallion in early hip-hop videos, and a broader celebration of diverse Black cultural expression.[250] Participants in her study describe listening to reggae alongside hip hop, merengue, and bachata, reflecting the pluralistic sonic environment of Caribbean New York.[251] This eclecticism isn't mere cosmopolitanism; it represents the sonic dimension of triple identity consciousness, in which musical taste functions as cultural capital deployed strategically across social contexts.

Participants' engagement with Caribbean popular music (CPM) spans a wide spectrum, from Paula's lifelong commitment to the reggae and calypso canon to Blake's ambient, nostalgia-driven relationship, yet their accounts consistently confirm music's function as a vector of cultural identity. All six reported listening to CPM; five listened to Jamaican styles (dancehall and reggae) and five to Trinibagonian styles (predominantly soca and calypso), a pattern of cross-island consumption reflecting the transcultural sonic environment documented in the neighborhood data.

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[249]Basch 2001, 130.

[250]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 68.

[251]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 73.

The first CPM songs participants remembered illuminate the domestic pathways of musico-cultural transmission. Teresa recalled "Too Young to Soca" (Machel Montano), played frequently at home and associated with singing along with her father; Paula recalled "Redemption Song" (Bob Marley), first heard at a family house party; Tanya recalled "Three Little Birds" (Bob Marley) at a family function; Colette recalled "I'm Still In Love With You" (Sean Paul) or "Murder She Wrote" (Chaka Demus & Pliers) at family gatherings in Yonkers; Blake heard Sean Paul's "Temperature" on the car radio, tracing it to her Guyanese mother's influence. These accounts demonstrate that Caribbean popular music enters second-generation lives through family gatherings, domestic routines, and the sensory rituals of everyday Caribbean life in the city.[252]

When asked how music shaped their feelings of community belonging, participants underscored CPM's dual function as connective tissue and cultural litmus test. Colette captured the ambivalence most precisely: music "adds to my feeling of belonging" because "there are certain songs that we all know and connect on," yet it also "detracts in a sense knowing that I'm not up to date on that music and it feels like the passing of time and could continue to weaken that connection." Teresa was unequivocal: "ADD 100 percent. We wouldn't be us without the music." Paula described music as connecting her to "something bigger." Tanya framed it as a reminder of "the greatness that comes from small islands." Blake, whose active listening has moved away from CPM, acknowledged that "because music is communal, I think hearing the CPM songs I grew up with…makes me feel connected with my larger Caribbean community,

[252]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 68–69.

even though I don't listen to them actively on my own." This observation, that communal musical experience sustains connection even absent individual practice, resonates directly with Chapter 3's findings about community as the essential mediating factor in whether music produces cultural belonging.

Current listening practices reveal how the shift from communal to individual engagement reshapes CPM's function. Paula's taste has remained unchanged; she continues listening to the same reggae and calypso, describing it as making her "feel good." Teresa maintains a Caribbean playlist spanning 1990 to the present, songs she calls "BANGERS" that "remind me of home." Tanya listens to "R&B and new school dancehall via SoundCloud" alongside Bob Marley and Sanchez. Angelica described genre-specific functions: "soca mostly to feel special during holidays, dancehall for upbeat vibes/dance, reggae for more chill vibes," a differentiation suggesting distinct emotional roles for each CPM style. Colette acknowledged not actively seeking CPM, describing it as "usually something I stumble across online." Blake has moved toward K-pop, K-indie, and contemporary Christian music, a trajectory departing from CPM but reflecting the eclecticism Lorick-Wilmot documents as characteristic of Caribbean New York's pluralistic sonic environment.

Aesthetics & Flags

The visual landscape of New York City's Caribbean neighborhoods communicates cultural identity through a rich vocabulary of flags, signage, clothing, and spatial aesthetics. Foner describes these neighborhoods as distinctive sensory environments marked by national flags, island newspapers in storefront windows, and tropical imagery, all signaling Caribbean cultural

ownership of urban space.[253] Flatbush Avenue has emerged as a primary site for this visual expression. As Foner observes, West Indian New Yorkers are more likely to go to Flatbush Avenue to develop a sense of West Indian ethnicity than to Kingston or Port of Spain, suggesting that the aesthetic environment of the diaspora has become, in certain respects, more central to identity formation than the physical Caribbean itself.[254] While the core of the West Indian community centered earlier on central Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, it shifted during the 1970s to the Crown Heights, East Flatbush, and Flatbush sections of Brooklyn, with distinct West Indian neighborhoods also developing in southeastern Queens and the northeast Bronx.[255]

During the annual Carnival, visual identity assertion reaches its apex. Meehan's rendering of the Eastern Parkway scene captures how carnival costume transforms the parade route into a moving gallery of Caribbean visual culture, with elaborate costumes, national flags, and island-specific color schemes converging in a public performance that is simultaneously aesthetic spectacle and political statement.[256] The masquerade tradition, the assumption of creative masks and sobriquets, is central to Trinidadian carnival culture, a practice rooted in the stickfighting and oratory of Port of Spain's barrack yards and carried forward into the diaspora. Robert's description of a driver's country-flag medallion hanging from a rearview mirror while soca plays from the car's speakers illustrates how national flags function not merely as decorative symbols but as deliberate assertions of island affiliation woven into the texture of everyday life.

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[253]Foner 2001, 3–4.

[254]Foner 2001, 4.

[255]Kasinitz 1992, 55; Foner 2001, 8.

[256]Meehan 2009, 106–108.

While the survey did not directly solicit responses about visual aesthetics, several participants' accounts touched upon the symbolic dimensions of Caribbean identity in ways that complement this analysis. Tanya described feeling most at home "in spaces where people and music are familiar and can remind me of the greatness that comes with being Caribbean," suggesting an aesthetic of recognition in which visual and sonic markers converge to produce belonging. Teresa's repeated references to carnival's visual culture imply identification with the aesthetic traditions Meehan reads as decolonized contact zones.[257] Angelica's identification with "being from Brooklyn and being a New Yorker" alongside Grenadan heritage suggests a dual aesthetic sensibility drawing from both the visual codes of the West Indian Brooklyn enclaves and the broader vocabulary of Black urban life in New York. This fusion resonates with the "New York Caribbean" identity documented in the interview data and with Robert's observation that cultural pride requires public symbols to demonstrate the diversity of Caribbean people and that they are appreciated.[258]

Robert frames New York City itself as a space where public symbols enable cultural pride; he cannot imagine being as proud about his culture and heritage in another part of the country where such symbols are absent.[259] This spatial dimension of aesthetics, the recognition that Caribbean visual culture requires specific urban environments to flourish, connects the material landscape of flags, storefronts, and carnival costumes to the broader processes of identity construction documented throughout this section. The intentional maintenance of ethnic

[257]Meehan 2009, 106–108.
[258]Foner 2001, 4.
[259]Lorick-Wilmot 2018, 73.

dress and speech patterns functions strategically as a mechanism for preserving the distinction between West Indian and African American identities.[260] The deployment of visual markers, from the everyday flag medallion to the spectacular carnival costume, constitutes a continuous practice of cultural assertion that renders Caribbean identity visible within the city's multiethnic landscape.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 — Lost: Displacement & Longing

This chapter traces childhood and adolescence through subtraction, following the gradual thinning, fracturing, and quiet setting-down of the Caribbean culture the participants absorbed in their earliest years. The chapter is organized into two parts. *Childhood* establishes the unevenness of that absorption while it was still underway. *Adolescence* traces what becomes visible as the supply begins to thin.

In *Lost*, *Childhood* (part 1) maps the variable sources through which Caribbean music and behavioral practice reached each participant—the household, the block, the wider relational world—and establishes that the behavioral side of the upbringing runs deeper than the sonic. While *Adolescence* (part 2) maps what happens once schooling, devices, and peer settings begin to disclose, often only in retrospect, what had been quietly receding. Together the two parts show that the Caribbean upbringing the participants experienced as automatic in fact rested on specific, contingent supports—legible as supports only once they began to give way.

[260]Crowder and Tedrow 2001, 86.

What *Lost* refuses is the grammar of pure grief. The chapter asks not what was taken from the participants but what the conditions of the upbringing's ordinary availability required, and what their slow disclosure made visible about an upbringing the participants had, until that disclosure, experienced as automatic.

Chapter 2 — Found: Relocation & Belonging

This chapter traces the same childhood and adolescence through addition, following the people, practices, and gatherings through which Caribbean belonging reaches the participants and the friendships through which it continues to circulate. Where *Lost* tracked partial withdrawal, *Found* tracks delivery, extension, and eventual authorship. Like *Lost*, the chapter is organized into two parts, *Childhood* and *Adolescence*.

Consequently, *Childhood* in Chapter 2 traces the household practices, communal gatherings, and inter-generational exchanges through which Caribbean music and rituals reach each participant before they have vocabulary for any of it. *Adolescence* then traces what happens once that received material becomes something the participants have to handle, curate, and claim on their own—through devices, platforms, and the peer friendships that carry Caribbean music outward into spheres organized around other defaults. Together the two parts show that Caribbean belonging is built and handed across through specific people, practices, and gatherings, then authored by the adolescent rather than only absorbed.

What *Found* refuses is the grammar of pure inheritance. The chapter asks not what the participants inherited intact but what the people, practices, and friendships through which

Caribbean belonging arrives required to deliver it, extend it, and hand it forward to the adolescent as something they could carry on their own.

Chapter 3 — Liminality: Situating Cultural Transmission

This chapter takes up the developmental shift from adolescence into adulthood, where navigating one's culture becomes unavoidable and high-stakes because the nature of choosing changes. The transmission pathways that saturated childhood have given way to recession, and what was once casually discarded is now scarce, coveted, valued. But preservation is not a task adults opt into. It arrives bound to a second inheritance the participant never chose.

The chapter argues this in two parts. *Cultural Capital & Legitimacy* traces the contested terrain adult belonging now stands on: legitimacy contested because status was set before the participant could weigh in, the pressures queer and trans participants navigate within Caribbean spaces shaped by colonial law and church doctrine, and the friction between collectivist Caribbean values and individualistic American institutional life. Whereas *Present* pivots away from what the landscape does to participants toward what participants do inside it: the everyday practices through which they preserve the music, foodways, language, and rituals childhood once delivered without their effort, and through which they locate or build the spaces where Caribbean cultural life still registers as home.

Across both parts, *Liminality* locates a single structural shift: in adulthood, belonging is no longer something the participants inherit but something they actively build—legitimacy constructed under negotiation rather than claimed by birth, preservation performed by hand under conditions that no longer supply it on their own. Heritage stops being a thing the

participant has and becomes a thing they do—constructed against a status they were never able to choose.

Chapter 4 — Home Is Where the Heart Is: Locating "Home" in the In-Between

This chapter is where the dissertation's argument arrives. Where *Liminality* showed that adult Caribbean belonging is no longer inherited but actively built, *Home* asks what that building produces and answers the question the dissertation opened with: where is home in the diaspora? The chapter is organized into the single *Home* part, which contains two ethnographic sections: *Transcultural Permutations* and *Born Foreign*.

Transcultural Permutations names what the participants construct—the New York Caribbean, a transcultural and pluralized self-description American racial discourse offers no name for. The section establishes the New York Caribbean as a collective proposal whose plurality is constitutive: no participant's version exhausts it, and no version cancels another's. *Born Foreign* then names the position these participants occupy that American belonging has no category for, and asks where this constructed self finds home. The participants' accounts converge on a relational answer: home is not a fixed place but the presence of people who have witnessed enough of the participant's complexity to make performance unnecessary.

What Chapter 4 demonstrates is the dissertation's thesis ethnographically: that Afro-West Indian Americans use Caribbean popular music as a contact zone for transcultural identity construction, that what they construct is a pluralized self the existing categories cannot hold, and that home—for a generation born in the United States and raised inside Caribbean households

whose customs differed from the country around them—lives not in any place but in the people willing to see them fully.

1. Lost: Displacement & Longing

LOST

Lost begins where the Caribbean cultural inheritance the participants absorbed in childhood first becomes legible as something that could thin out, fracture, or be quietly set down. It begins in the household and neighborhoods, before any of the participants knows to name what is being delivered or what is at risk of being lost. What this chapter traces is the conditions under which that inheritance—absorbed through immersion, unlabeled as inheritance at the time—becomes visible as inheritance through the specific modes of its partial withdrawal.

The argument across *Lost*'s two parts, *Childhood* and *Adolescence*, that follow is that the inheritance's partial withdrawal proceeds through two distinct movements. *Childhood* maps the unevenness—the earliest conditions under which the inheritance begins to thin, through mechanisms the participants at the time could not recognize as thinning because they had no prior state of fullness to measure against. *Adolescence* maps the scalar reconfigurations of school, geography, peer networks, and cultural register through which the thinning becomes severance, and through which the participants come, unevenly, to recognize what has been happening.

What this chapter refuses is the grammar of pure grief. The *Preface* governs: narratives of diasporic formation cannot be reduced to narratives of loss, and the participants' recognition that their inheritance was always being actively maintained is not identical to the experience of having been dispossessed of it. What *Lost* asks is not what was taken from the participants, but

what the conditions of its ordinary availability required, and what the slow disclosure of those conditions made visible about an inheritance they had, until the disclosure, experienced as ambient.

CHILDHOOD

Transcultural Foundations

Transcultural Foundations traces the sonic register of childhood unevenness: what the participants heard and didn't hear as Caribbean music in their earliest years through its primary arc, *American vs. Caribbean: Contrasting Cultural Spheres*. For some, the unevenness was already underway at this register, before adolescence arrived to stage its more visible ruptures.

American vs. Caribbean: Contrasting Cultural Spheres, works this at two levels. The first, *Transmission Failure*, turns to the household—the scale at which the domestic soundscape's Caribbean content was present, absent, or intermittent. Whereas the second, *Contrasting Soundscapes*, turns to the geographic—how the sonic environment itself varied across the spaces the participants moved through, from island to city, block to block, street to house.

The stakes are analytic. If the inheritance had been passed on through explicit instruction, its later erosion would be a story about parents who stopped teaching. It is not that story. The inheritance arrived through channels the participants did not control and could not name. Transcultural Foundations establishes the structure that was there to become visible only later—audible to the adult interview subject but not to the child living inside it.

American vs. Caribbean: Contrasting Cultural Spheres

American and Caribbean music both reached every participant in childhood, though through different channels. For instance, my friend Colette (they/them), a Jamaican-American "twice removed" I met in college, told me that their household ran on American music; Caribbean music reached them, when it did, through school peers, family functions, and an uncle's wider social circle. Jennifer's Canarsie childhood, by contrast, delivered both continuously, at densities that shifted from one block to the next. Teresa's case stretched further still—summers in rural St. Lucia and Trinidad staged an annual contrast her New York childhood could not produce on its own. Three households, three configurations, no single channel through which the American–Caribbean contact reached them in childhood.

The two segments that follow work this spectrum at two scales. *Transmission Failure* addresses the intermediate scale, where Colette's account foregrounds the channels through which Caribbean music reached them and the household channel that, in their family, ran on something else. While *Contrasting Soundscapes* addresses the peripheral scale, where Teresa's island/city axis and Jennifer's community axis together configure the variability of the sonic environment itself. Both scales participate in the same unevenness register; what each illuminates is a different mechanism through which that unevenness became, for the participant configuring it, first audible.

Transmission Failure

On car rides through their Brooklyn neighborhood in elementary school, with their mom "playing it on the radio in the car," Colette absorbed whatever the New York station the family had left

the stereo tuned to was playing. The song Colette would later name as the first one they remembered hearing—“Blue (Da Ba Dee),” the 1998 Eiffel 65 synthpop hit—was a European novelty picked up off those frequencies, arriving in a Jamaican-American child's first memory through a station that wasn't running Caribbean music.

> **Colette:** I think the first song I remember listening to, where I remember that specific song and have a memory tied to it, would probably be "I'm Blue." "I'm blue, da-ba-dee-da-ba-di." That was playing on the radio when we were in elementary school, and I just remember it being such a bop, and my mom playing it on the radio in the car. My memory of most songs around that time is stuff that I heard on the radio—whatever the New York radio stations were.

What this moment makes visible isn't an absence in Colette's earliest soundtrack but a property of the medium that delivered it. The radio in the moving car is an episodic channel: it produces the kind of musical encounter that crystallizes into a "first song"—discrete, nameable, datable, retrievable years later as a memory event with edges. The Caribbean music of Colette's childhood was traveling through other channels: the family functions, the household at hours when the radio wasn't on, the gatherings where the music was the surround rather than a track. Those channels move at a different memorial register—ambient rather than episodic, communal rather than solo, the listening itself not structured around the track as the unit of attention. What the car ride discloses isn't what was scarce in Colette's childhood but how their childhood's musical availability was sorted across modes of transmission, and what each mode made narratable later as opposed to what it left, in childhood, ambient. The chapter follows that sorting forward.

Later I asked Colette where Caribbean music actually did enter their childhood. The answer wasn't one place. Dancehall and reggae came in from the edges—school peers, summer

cookouts, an uncle with a wider social circle than the household had. The music arrived inconsistently, often without names Colette could attach to it.

> **Holland:** So when you're saying these styles, give me a sense—is this still in the Caribbean popular music realm of dancehall, reggae stuff, or would this be something different?
> **Colette:** Yeah, yeah. I say dancehall and reggae, yeah.
> **Holland:** Okay. So were there any songs in particular that stood out to you from any of these interactions—like either weddings, family functions, school?
> **Colette:** I think that definitely going between... There was one song, and I'm not remembering what it was. Elephant Man, like? And I don't remember what the song was, but that was a big one. Like a dance hit for sure. I remember the feeling of being like, "oh, this is nasty." You know what I mean? Maybe it wasn't so much the content of the song so much as what you were supposed to do when you were hearing the song that I remember. But stuff from family functions was less likely to be that type of style and more... I think in the survey I mentioned "Murder She Wrote," or I think "Welcome to Jamrock" came later. It's hard for me to necessarily place what it is that I heard around family versus elsewhere, like on the radio or just around or from other people's cars on the street or whatever it was.
> **Colette:** At summer barbecues, I remember going with my uncle, who has a much different social circle than my immediate family, much more broad, meeting a bunch of cousins and stuff that I didn't know existed, and just hearing a lot of Caribbean music that I hadn't heard before. Stuff that I wouldn't necessarily be able to name, but those might have been the first times that I ever heard, maybe, like Gyptian, or some other artists that were, like, you have to be a little bit deeper into actively seeking out Caribbean music, because maybe it's not playing on the radio the way that some other hits were around that time.
> **Holland:** And this is when you left New York and moved to around Baltimore and stuff.
> **Colette:** Yeah, I think this might have been after I moved to Maryland and then went back to New York for a little bit in the summertime. It could have been sixth, seventh, eighth grade, so maybe middle school years. But I don't think at that point I had started necessarily seeking it out on my own yet, from what I remember.
> **Holland:** Your immediate family wasn't really listening to Caribbean music but it might have been some friends at school, or maybe your uncle takes you somewhere, maybe in the neighborhood, because he has the connections. But it's not the immediate vicinity on a near-constant basis, in the same way that your parents playing R&B, soul, disco, rock, pop would be.
> **Colette:** Exactly, exactly.

What Colette describes isn't a Caribbean inheritance that was once held and later taken. It's an inheritance whose channels of delivery were uneven from the start, each carrying its share, none carrying all. The radio played what New York radio in the early 2000s was willing to play: Sean Paul's and Elephant Man's crossover hits, not the broader Jamaican catalogue. School peers shared dancehall in fragments—a dance hit, a chorus, a body of attention without the context

that would have made it more than that. The wider family network—uncles' summer barbecues, the cousin circles those gatherings opened—added intermittent communal layers we will return to in *Sharing Is Caring(?)*. The immediate household, the channel that would have run continuously if it ran at all, didn't run on Caribbean music. What the chapter is tracking isn't whether the inheritance arrived but the architecture through which it did, and what the architecture made available, partially and unevenly, to a child who could not yet see the architecture for what it was.

Contrasting Soundscapes

A coconut dropping in the backyard. A bird calling from the hillside. A waterfall running continuously enough that the child heard it as part of the air. Music playing—almost always music playing—but in a surround the New York summer didn't hold. Teresa (she/her), a "Trinilucian" primary-school friend, spent some childhood summers visiting her parents' families in St. Lucia and Trinidad. I asked how the sounds she heard on the islands compared to the ones she encountered in the city.

> **Teresa:** I think the musical sounds and the family sounds are the same, but the external sounds are what's different. So like in New York, you're used to hearing the honking of cars or like the light pollution of all the street lights and everything coming into your house, or just-You don't really hear like nature and like, the birds singing. Like, that sounds so like I'm being like, I'm in the country. But in St. Lucia and Trinidad, my family is mostly from like, country-er parts. So I feel like the mixture of hearing like-This sounds so foreign, like a coconut dropping in the backyard and birds singing while also having this family moment and hearing, I don't know, a waterfall in the freaking background just makes it so much more calming and homey, than I guess in New York, where it's kind of like more city sounds.
> **Holland:** Like, just sound pollution 24/7 versus just being able to hear things and distinguish the sounds.
> **Teresa:** Yeah. Like, I feel like you hear the music more or you hear your family more than you do in the city.

I spent several summers in Jamaica as a child and had a similar experience, so I understood what she meant—hearing frogs chirp at night, waves crashing in the distance, seagulls squawking overhead makes everything feel calmer and more relaxed. She agreed and said she understood why the islands are considered “retirement countries.” Her childhood encounter with her “home” countries imprinted an ideal of home against which her American urban experience would always be measured.

> **Teresa:** It's so much nicer. Like I brought my boyfriend for the first time to St. Lucia last year for Christmas and he just kept saying, "How do we move here? How do we move here? How do I make it so that we could work here or work remote and just stay in St. Lucia?" And I feel like most people when their first time is, that's the experience. Like, “wow. It's so much slower paced.” Everyone's just a little bit happier. Little chiller. Like, New York City is just a mean place.

What Teresa names here isn't the music of the islands against the music of the city—the music, she says, was the same. It is the layer under the music, what gets heard in the gap the music does not occupy. “You hear the music more, or you hear your family more, than you do in the city.” The sonic contrast Teresa's summers staged was between two conditions of listening: one in which the surround demands continuous acoustic filtering, and one in which it does not. What Teresa heard against the surround of the islands, Jennifer heard against one Canarsie block versus another. Jennifer (she/her), a Jamaican-American and childhood friend I’ve known since middle school, grew up in Canarsie between two addresses a handful of blocks apart—102nd Street in her early years, 88th Street for most of the rest. I asked her to paint the picture of the neighborhood and what she remembered hearing in it.

> **Jennifer:** It's so interesting because I remember having two big places that I grew up. The first was 102nd Street in Canarsie, and that was only the first couple of years of my sentience. My mother, my brother mostly—he's six years older than me—spent most of his time in that household; I was only there for the last couple years. And I remember that being a very neighborhood-oriented thing. I remember there being block parties. That was a big

> thing. When we moved to 88th Street, also in Canarsie, we knew our direct neighbors, and maybe my mother knew other people on the—but I didn't really know the other neighborhood people. There would be little block events and block parties but I remember it feeling decidedly less neighborhood-esque than our first home. Where I spent most of my time, which was on 88th Street, we would be playing music but there was a concerted effort to not be too loud that didn't really exist at 102nd Street. When there was a block party, when somebody did kick open a fire hydrant in the middle of summer and that was the vibe, then that was the vibe.
> **Holland:** So when they did have those block parties, was there radio playing? Did someone bring in some speakers? Was there any kind of music that stood out to you?
> **Jennifer:** Yes! That was a little bit more top 40—that's when I first got introduced to Destiny's Child and things like that. And then, because Canarsie is also a pretty Jamaican area, there were still a lot of dancehall and reggae. But yeah, lots of top 40 and then Sean Paul—a reggae-pop kind of thing. That was probably boom boxes, and maybe speakers were in their nascence, but I don't know that people really had speakers. If you had speakers, especially at that time, it was probably a big one that had to stay in your home. Like, if you had a portable speaker you got money.

The two Canarsie blocks Jennifer describes were not continuous territory. “We would be playing music but there was a concerted effort to like not be too loud” on 88th Street; on 102nd Street, the block party and the fire hydrant kicked open in summer were “the vibe.” Same borough, same neighborhood, a short walk apart—but the sonic environments the two blocks supported differed in density, in loudness, in who was outside, in what music was permitted to move beyond the house. The scale is finer than Teresa's island/city axis, but the mechanism is the same: the soundscape is not a given. It varies with the block, with the neighbors, with the particular ecology of who else lives there. What Contrasting Soundscapes makes visible is that the unevenness register—the uneven distribution of the childhood Caribbean inheritance—registered first, for some participants, not in whether the music reached them but in the variability of the conditions under which it did.

Contrasting Cultural Spheres traced the first register of the unevenness—the variability of the sonic channel through which Caribbean music did or did not reach the participants in childhood. What it does not reach is the layer beneath the music, where Caribbean social life

was doing its own transmission work without needing music as its primary carrier. That is where Communal Practices picks up.

Communal Practices

Communal Practices traces the second register of childhood unevenness: the behavioral layer of Caribbean inheritance—the rhythms, gatherings, and relational habits through which Caribbean sociality is lived, and the uneven densities at which those rhythms reached the participants in childhood. Where *Contrasting Cultural Spheres* traced the sonic variability of the unevenness, *Communal Practices* traces its lived variability: the different densities at which collectivist defaults, communal grammars, and idiom-specific speech operated across the participants' childhood homes and neighborhoods.

Sharing Is Caring(?): Individualism vs. Collectivism turns to the practices themselves—the aunts and uncles, the family functions, the dominoes, the babies passed around, the curry goat at the center of the gathering—as they operated in the participants' childhoods, and as their density and continuity varied from one household to the next.

The stakes for the chapter are that the behavioral register runs deeper than the sonic one. The sonic can be reconstructed through YouTube, through Spotify, through a compilation pulled from a search. The behavioral cannot. *Communal Practices* establishes the unevenness at its most structurally consequential layer—already beginning to withdraw, for some participants, before adolescence's more visible ruptures arrived.

Sharing Is Caring(?): Individualism vs. Collectivism

Community is an essential facet of Caribbean life—cultivated, maintained, and grown through family and communal gatherings and activities. Every participant this chapter tracks grew up inside some version of that work, but the shape it took differed from one household to the next. In Colette's childhood, the widest such network belonged to an uncle whose summer cookouts reached beyond the household's everyday circle. Jennifer's two Canarsie blocks, by contrast, differed in whether the street itself functioned as a communal extension of the household—the first block did, the second did not. Teresa, meanwhile, spent her childhood weaving across her parents' divorce-reconfigured households on the Trinidadian and St. Lucian sides, the community held together across, not inside, a single family unit. Everywhere present, nowhere at a single rhythm.

The subsection works primarily through Colette's account because Colette's interview surfaces the durational structure of the Caribbean family function with unusual completeness—the dominoes game that continues across years, the aunts and uncles who host the same gatherings decade over decade, the curry goat at the cousin's baby shower earlier in the year as a continuation of the same table set in the participant's own childhood. Jennifer's and Teresa's accounts will surface elsewhere in the chapter, where their configurations of the same communal register do different analytical work. What this subsection traces is what Caribbean collectivist defaults looked like, in operation, in one participant's childhood—and what the operation was delivering, unnamed, to a child who was absorbing it ambiently.

What Colette describes, when they speak about the family functions of their childhood, is not a single event but a composite—an archive of aunts' and uncles' gatherings that recurred

across the years and persisted, with the same cast and the same rhythms, into the present. I asked Colette to paint the picture.

> **Holland:** So paint me a picture of these family functions. Who would be there? What might be present or not present?
> **Colette:** Let's see. This one cookout that I went to with my uncle, where it was a lot of people that I didn't know. I just remember there being a lot of men that I didn't recognize. The uncles are grilling; they're probably playing. My uncle's really into golf, so I feel like there was some type of golf setup on the lawn. I don't remember exactly what food and drink was there. But I just remember there being, okay, there's plastic chairs. We're set up on the grass. The party started after dusk, and we're going late into the night. Music playing. And the kids are kind of off doing whatever it is that they do—the kids being me in seventh grade or however old I was, and the other people of that age who had kind of gathered.
> **Holland:** Like cousins and stuff?
> **Colette:** Yeah, cousins or family friends. I remember meeting this kid who I still don't know how it is that we're related, or if we're related. I actually remember being very enamored with him having a Jamaican accent because I didn't have anyone that was close to me and my family who was my age, who had a Jamaican accent. And so I was like, wow, I thought that was really, really cool.
> **Colette:** Everything about other family functions I'm thinking about—like my aunts and uncles' holiday party or summer barbecues, where there's punch. They're probably frying fish and serving—if it's a summer thing, then burgers, hot dogs. Otherwise, some type of Jamaican cuisine. And then there are people passing babies around. There's a game of dominoes happening that's very intense.
> **Holland:** Oh yeah, the most intense game of dominoes you've ever seen in your life.
> **Colette:** Yes, exactly. And I think back to my cousin's baby shower that happened earlier this year, and the type of music that was blasting there and the vibes, including the food that was being served. We had curry goat and plantain and fried fish, all of that. The game of dominoes in the corner. It basically is a mirror image to the same—and these are the same aunts and uncles who were hosting similar events when I was in elementary, middle school. So it's the continuity of that. It's all the same people, just older, you know?

"It basically is a mirror image to the same." What Colette catches at the cousin's baby shower is not a single past gathering reproduced but a recurring shape—the same aunts and uncles, the same food, the same dominoes game in the corner, the same circulating babies—held in continuity across decades. Colette's account highlights the durational structure of Caribbean family functions: a set of practices that constitute collective continuity not through any single gathering but through their recurrence across years and hosts. What the communal register

cannot survive — what has not yet entered Colette's account, and will enter it in *Adolescence*— is the geographic displacement of the conditions that let it recur.

Communal Practices' unevenness register operated in childhood through the variable density of collectivist protocols—thick in some participants' households and neighborhoods, thinner in others, consistently active somewhere in each participant's life but not uniformly active everywhere. What *Childhood* leaves in place for *Adolescence* is an inheritance that was not yet recognized as an inheritance: sonic, behavioral, absorbed ambiently, received at whatever density the participant's household and block made available. *Adolescence* is where the ambient reception ends. The conditions that had delivered the inheritance without requiring the participant to notice them begin, in scalar succession, to reconfigure—and the recognition of what had been delivered arrives, unevenly, alongside the first visible severance.

ADOLESCENCE

Divergence: Eroding Cultural Pillars

Divergence traces the first section of adolescence: the conditions under which the participants' cultural environment shifted around them—forces outside their control—and the pillars that had sustained the childhood inheritance began, in scalar succession, to erode. The shift does not arrive as a single event. It arrives as a sequence of reconfigurations operating at different scales—school, curation, comportment—each disclosing a mechanism through which the childhood inheritance had, until that reconfiguration, been ambient.

The section works through three arcs: *Stuck In-Between: Competing Cultural Spheres*, *Changes: Consequences of Self Investment*, and *Something Taken: Cultural Code-Switching & Strategic Divestments*.

Stuck In-Between: Competing Cultural Spheres follows the intermediate scale, where the homogeneously Caribbean environment of early childhood gives way to a student body configured differently—and the layered structure of cultural embeddedness (school, neighborhood, household) begins to disclose itself through the partial removal of one layer. *Changes: Consequences of Self Investment* picks up the curation scale, where adolescent technology makes personal music curation possible and the participants begin, unevenly, to develop private listening lives that diverge from their families' and neighborhoods'. *Something Taken: Cultural Code-Switching & Strategic Divestments* moves to the comportment scale, where daily commute across sharp demographic gradients installs a second cultural register in

the participant's speech and body—and the installation, in its operation, quietly subtracts something.

The pillars don't erode in the same sequence for every participant, and the subsequent passages aren't three stages of a single developmental arc. They're three registers of the same structural condition—the conditions that had sustained the inheritance in childhood were always specific, always contingent, and when those conditions shifted, each register marked the shift differently. *Divergence* doesn't track what the participants lost. It tracks what the inheritance's childhood ambience required to sustain itself, and what adolescence—for the participants in this chapter—did to those requirements.

Stuck In-Between: Competing Cultural Spheres

Adolescence reconfigured the cultural sphere for every participant this chapter tracks. Colette's sixth-grade transfer to Mark Twain Middle School brought a demographic shift inside the building while the neighborhood around their childhood held—and the buffering the neighborhood had been doing became visible in the gap. Teresa's daily commute between her home neighborhood and the Brooklyn Heights independent-school corridor ran her through sharp demographic gradients that reconfigured the available registers at both ends. Jennifer's institutional pathway, opened first by Prep for Prep and then by Saint Ann's, shifted what was structurally possible for a life in a way her family's Canarsie-based network had no register to read. Three scales of reconfiguration—school, commute, institutional pathway—each making the prior stability of the cultural sphere legible in the moment of its disturbance.

The arc primarily works through Colette's Mark Twain account because their sequence of transitions—primary school in Flatbush, transfer to Mark Twain in sixth grade, move to Maryland at twelve—discloses the layered structure of diasporic embeddedness through its partial withdrawals. What the Mark Twain transfer made visible, which a single rupture could not have, was that the cultural immersion of early childhood had been dense enough to survive school demographic change alone—but that the survival had depended on the neighborhood itself continuing to supply what the school had ceased to. Teresa's Saint Ann's account configures the same shared condition at a different register; Jennifer's Prep for Prep account configures it at yet another. Both will surface elsewhere in the chapter, where their configurations of the competing-spheres register do different analytical work that this subsection's focus on the layered-buffer question does not address.

Colette grew up in East Flatbush and attended primary school in Flatbush through fifth grade, where a predominantly Black and Caribbean student body reflected the surrounding Afro-West Indian community. In sixth grade, they transferred to Mark Twain Middle School,[261] a specialized magnet in Coney Island whose demographics were meaningfully different from the ones they had grown up inside. I asked Colette what they remembered about the transfer.

> **Colette:** It was so much more diverse when it came to the demographics of the kids there. In 5th grade we had a single white boy, and everyone was like, oh, "wow, this white boy." Then we got to 6th grade and it was just so much more diverse when it came to Russian people and Asian people and, you know,
> **Holland:** It wasn't as homogenous.
> **Colette:** It wasn't as homogenous. And, at that point in 6th grade, my close friends were Polish, Jewish—I mean, okay, that's not a race—but like white and Asian. I think most of them were of some type of Slavic origin. And so that was so different from what I

[261]Mark Twain is a liberal arts–centered specialized public magnet middle school near Coney Island that employs a test-based admission system.

> experienced for the past however many years. My preschool, it was all Jamaican teachers and kids too, right? So for the past 11, 12 years of my life, I was surrounded by Jamaican adults and kids. Well, not only Jamaican. I would say overall Caribbean adults and kids. And then there was the shift to 6th grade where I was like, oh, there's more to New York than the Caribbean people.
> **Holland:** Just like Black Caribbean people.
> **Colette:** Yeah, I'm like, oh, wow, this is what the people who live on Long Island are like, you know, and just experiencing that. I think already then I had started to make the shift of not being as connected to Caribbean culture outside of whatever was happening at home or with my family. But I could still plug into it because when I went home, in my neighborhood? iIt was still very much Caribbean. Then leaving New York entirely, that was a different story.
> **Holland:** I mean, that makes a lot of sense. It sounds to me, from what you're describing, that a lot of the feelings of connection to your cultural identity and how you're thinking about yourself are shaped by the space or the place that you're in.
> **Colette:** 100%, yeah.
> **Holland:** And so leaving New York kind of made a huge severance for you in a lot of ways, in terms of not being able to fully actualize or further invest in your cultural identity.
> **Colette:** That's absolutely right. Yeah, for sure.

What struck me about this passage when we were speaking was the specificity with which Colette narrates not severance but buffering: “I could still plug into it because when I went home, in my neighborhood, it was still very much Caribbean.”

Their account clearly shows how Mark Twain transfer hadn't dislodged the cultural immersion of early childhood. The school's demographics shifted, and the neighborhood around Colette stayed—and the buffering the neighborhood had been doing, unnamed while it was working, only became identifiable the moment the school was removed. Colette's account makes the Scalar Mediated Transmission (SMT) framework's interdependence visible. The personal experience of Caribbean music is shaped by the communal settings that give it meaning, and those communal settings are where Caribbean music's diasporic flows become locally legible to the individual listener. Remove the community, as Colette's move from New York to Maryland did, and the music loses more than its immediate resonance—it loses its link to the wider network that made it meaningful in the first place. What felt to Colette like a personal

connection to the music was, all along, sustained by the communal frame that connected her to the diaspora at large.

What *Stuck In-Between* discloses through the Mark Twain transfer is a mechanism the childhood inheritance had been depending on—the neighborhood buffer that kept working until it stopped. The following segment, *Changes*, picks up a different mechanism at a different scale: the adolescent technology that, for the first time, made the question of what to listen to something the participant could answer privately, and the uneven consequences of their answering.

Changes: Consequences of Self Investment

The click wheel. The earbuds. The thousand songs and eventually more, pulled from burned CDs, LimeWire downloads, the family computer, the radio caught at the right moment with a recording button pressed. Somewhere in late elementary school or early middle school, Jennifer got an iPod—and the question of what to listen to became, for the first time, a question she could answer alone.

The iPod arrived alongside another shift: Jennifer was spending more time on the Prep for Prep commute, increasingly carrying her music alone. I asked her when her own musical taste began to separate from her family's.

> **Holland:** If you were thinking about the shifts—when you got your own musical taste, was it still something that, let's say, you were doing as a communal activity, like with your family? Or would this be more something you kept for yourself?
> **Jennifer:** I feel like it started becoming less family-based because of multiple different reasons. The rise of personal music, right? I probably had an iPod or something, and so I was able to listen to my music on my own. And then I started Prep for Prep in, like, fifth grade, right? So I'm spending more time commuting on my own and away from my mother. Music becomes especially, like—I don't know if this is—probably smack in the middle of

adolescence—but music becomes more of, not hide it, it's not something I'm hiding, but a solitary thing around this time. And so I'm curating my own musical taste, sort of separate from my mom, and it becomes a lot more contemporary. It's very much, like, what's on the radio? What are kids listening to? What are people listening to now? With a little bit, like—I would say my dancehall tastes were still a little early 2000s, late 90s.
Holland: I mean, it also helped that, you know, dancehall was becoming more mainstream, at least it was around there too.
Jennifer: Exactly! Exactly.
Holland: So for you, I guess at this point, what was influencing your music taste? Was this strictly from the radio? Was it, like, maybe your friends were playing something for you? Like, maybe it's, like, walking around you just heard it somewhere?
Jennifer: That's a good question. I have to think a lot of it was the radio. I don't remember showing people music until I get to Saint Ann's and I get an iPod, or an iPhone 4 or whatever. And then I remember music becoming communal again because I'm showing—"hey, listen to this." So in the middle, it's probably a lot of radio. I remember asking for CDs for Christmas. I remember I got Rated R in 2008, and that was a big—I asked, I begged, for that album, and my mother was like, "what is on this album?" But she bought it anyway. So I was still getting CDs, and then LimeWire was the thing—I was pirating. That was a big thing, but I was probably more into the people I knew from the radio, from the TV, from the VMAs performance. The awards were so big at this time, and you would watch them, or at least my family would watch the Grammys or something together. So if I found an artist there, maybe I would go seek them out a little bit more. But it's not until, I would say, maybe 2012 that music becomes more communal and people are showing me new artists and things like that, outside of the music I already listened to.

"I probably had an iPod or something, and so I was able to listen to my music on my own"—what Jennifer describes isn't a rejection of the family soundscape but a relocation of it, from the household stereo to a device moving with her across the Prep for Prep commute. The inheritance itself stays in place—she keeps the dancehall, the late-90s early-2000s repertoire her mother's household had set—but the implicit assumption that musical taste travels in time with family taste recedes. The iPod doesn't take the music away; it makes it, for the first time, something Jennifer is electing to carry.

Where Jennifer's curation moved inward to the device, Colette's moved sideways to a sibling. After the move to Maryland, the Caribbean music of their childhood reached them increasingly through their brother—a year and a half younger, actively cultivating the Jamaican

component of his identity in a way the Maryland environment offered Colette few other handholds for. I asked Colette how the shift felt from their side.

> **Colette:** Hmm. I think this is probably later in age, but my brother's a little bit over a year younger than me. Because we're closer in age, we can speak to that more. He always had his finger on the pulse of music—like, songs that were hits, that had come out that I had missed, or certain genres that I hadn't paid attention to. Particularly when it came to hip-hop and rap, he was more on top of that kind of music. And I also realized—this must have been middle school or early high school—when he would hang out with my cousins and stuff, I realized, like, oh, he knows some of these Caribbean songs that I don't know. He was much more on top of it. And so that's when I started to seek out more of that music, because I think he had more actively sought it out. When he moved from New York to Maryland, I think he had a desire to hold on to much more of his Jamaican identity and kind of define that for himself. And so he sought out more of the music and just had more of that connection. So that kind of triggered me to be like, oh yeah, I do love those songs, and then go and look them up myself. Because I'm like, why do my cousin and my brother know the lyrics to this song? I like the song too. Let me go, you know.
> **Holland:** So he's more like the active music connoisseur, and that kind of spurred you on to have maybe a slightly more interest in actively looking at it yourself.
> **Colette:** Yeah. For those songs—it's very easy for me to go through phases and forget about stuff, right? So for a while I was just listening to whatever it was that I listened to. And our tastes were also somewhat different. But when it came to certain types of music that I wasn't listening to, I could look to him as kind of a check of, oh, what am I missing? And that ended up being one of the things I was missing was, like, Caribbean popular music.

"I could look to him as kind of a check of, oh, what am I missing." Colette wasn't failing to curate. There was an iPod, there were phases, there were songs that stayed. But the Caribbean component of the inheritance had to be specifically prompted from outside to enter the selection at all—and the brother, moving actively toward Jamaican music in a way Maryland offered him few other anchors for, was the prompt. Without his visibility in Colette's everyday field, their own listening had, by their account, gone elsewhere. Read together, Jennifer's and Colette's accounts surface what Changes is tracking: not whether adolescent curation happened, but which parts of the inheritance the curation carried forward under its own power—and which parts required another vantage to stay present in the selection at all.

Changes traced what curation-as-self-investment did to the relation between adolescent listening and the family/neighborhood inheritance. The next segment, *Something Taken*, picks up at the immediate scale—what the daily commute across demographic gradients installed in the participant's speech, and what the installation, in its operation, quietly subtracted.

Something Taken: Cultural Code-Switching & Strategic Divestments

In a freshman dorm at Georgia Tech, three feet from a circle of Black classmates, Teresa needed a translator. The conversation wasn't parsing—the word-shapes, the cadences, the slang turns wouldn't add up. Her roommate bridged. The gap didn't start in Atlanta, Teresa would later tell me. It started at Saint Ann's, the Brooklyn Heights independent school across the East River from her home neighborhood, which she commuted to daily through all of adolescence. I asked her what she'd made of the incomprehension when it arrived.

> **Holland:** You said you needed a translator.
> **Teresa:** Yeah. When I first got to Atlanta, my roommate acted as a translator. There were moments that I genuinely would be in a circle of Black people talking, and I'd have to turn to her and be like, “what are we talking about?” And she'd go, “Oh, this person just said this. This person just said this.” And I'm like, that is not what they said. Like, you guys are not enunciating your words. Fuck.
> **Holland:** I think it's because, with the West Indian identities especially, there's a lot of accent on enunciation. There may be an accent too, but there's still the enunciation. If they're going into, like, patois or something, then you're going to probably lose some of that. But typically, if it's English—standard English—it's going to be enunciated.
> **Teresa:** Bro, and why can I understand patois? But I can't understand these people in Atlanta. I literally was like, that doesn't even make any sense. It showed me that it's just being used to it, being grown up in it. It just becomes a second language to you. Now, I go to Christian's family house and I can understand what everybody is saying. When I first started dating him, I was like, “Babe, your grandma just talks and I just have to smile and nod, because I don't know what she's saying to me.” I find that to be insane because she's speaking English.
> **Holland:** Just not in a way that you can understand.
> **Teresa:** I just don't understand. And so in moments like that, I feel particularly kind of, like, white. Like, I kind of feel like Saint Ann's stole something from me.
> **Holland:** It's like you feel that otheredness.

> **Teresa:** Othered. But then my little sister, she's 16. She went to PWIs her whole life. She went to Grace Church until eighth grade, and now she goes to boarding school. When we are next to each other, you can hear in her voice how quote-unquote white she is, and hearing my voice, how, like, hood I am. Like, I use the slang words, or I say "fronting," or I say "I'm gonna" instead of "I'm going to." Kira says, "I'm going to. I would like to." Like, she uses every single word. So then in moments like that, I feel particularly Black. I'm like, oh, like, dang—at least I didn't lose all of it. So that's kind of how I feel about my Blackness as a whole, I guess.

The theft Teresa names is not metaphorical in any loose sense. Saint Ann's, in its daily operation—the immersion in a room majority-white, affluent, institutionally ordered around an enunciation standard the home neighborhoods had not required of her—installed a speech register that foreclosed a different one. The different register is the one her Georgia Tech peers are speaking. It is also the one her younger sister, whose PWI-through-eighth-grade trajectory ran Teresa's institutional pathway more thoroughly, has had still more deeply installed. Hearing her sister's voice beside her own, Teresa hears herself as "particularly Black"—not because her Blackness has grown but because the contrast has made its partial retention audible. The theft, in Teresa's account, was continuous with the institution's ordinary operation: there was no moment at which Saint Ann's stopped being Saint Ann's and became the stealing, because the stealing was what Saint Ann's was across those years. The recognition of what was taken arrives later, when a room configured differently refuses the register Saint Ann's installed—and the refusal makes the theft audible for the first time. What Teresa lost, she could only hear by meeting people who hadn't lost it.

Divergence has traced the first section of adolescence—the scalar erosions through which the conditions that had sustained the childhood inheritance began, in adolescence, to reconfigure. *Distinguishing Identities* picks up the second movement: what the participants, consciously and unconsciously, do in response to the erosion. Not the erosion itself but the

adolescent self-work the erosion prompts—the partitioning of selves across settings, the developing vocabulary of what one is and is not, the accumulating awareness of insufficiency as a structural condition of the position one occupies. The shift from *Divergence* to *Distinguishing Identities* is the shift from what is happening to the participant to what the participant does in response, held together by the fact that the response, for every participant in this chapter, is itself a form of loss—because the distinguishing adolescence requires is also a setting-down.

Distinguishing Identities

Adolescence's second section, *Distinguishing Identities*, traces the second movement of adolescence: the self-work the participants perform in response to the erosion *Divergence* maps. The work is neither preservation nor assimilation. It is partitioning—a sorting of the self into compartments different settings are permitted to access, alongside an accumulating recognition of which compartments travel and which do not. The partitioning adolescence requires is itself a form of divestment: the distinguishing is also the setting-down. Some of what gets set down will register as loss only much later, through vantage points the adolescent self did not yet have access to.

This section's three arcs trace the self-work at three registers. *Too ___ To Fit: Finding A Place To Belong* follows the register of identity itself—the adolescent recognition of not-fitting as a structural condition of the position one occupies, and the tactical vocabularies the recognition prompts. *Partitions: School Self & Family Self* picks up the register of daily life—how the partition between home environment and school environment, for some participants, became

a partition between two selves whose incommensurability was the shape of their adolescent existence. *Something Lost: Cultural Reconfiguration & Unintentional Divestments* closes the section and the chapter at the register of consequence—what the partitioning, in its quiet ordinary operation, subtracted, and how the subtraction becomes legible to the adult looking back.

Distinguishing Identities refuses the framing in which adolescent self-work is either preservation of the inheritance against erosion or assimilation toward the institution. Neither frame holds what the participants' accounts surface: the self-work is both, at once. What it produces is not a preserved or an assimilated self but a partitioned one—with registers holding different coherences, compartments foreclosing different possibilities, and dimensions of the childhood inheritance setting down at different rates, under different conditions, in different degrees of visibility to the self doing the setting.

Too ___ To Fit: Finding A Place To Belong

Not-fitting arrived in adolescence for every participant this chapter tracks, though the axis along which it did so was different for each. In Colette's case, the axis ran through sibling divergence. She and her brother came apart on what a Jamaican identity could be asked to do in a new environment, and the vocabulary she developed—“I'm Jamaican” versus “I have Jamaican heritage”—was their way of holding the identity without inviting the tests. Teresa's axis was her middle-ground position: her peers read her as Caribbean but not fully Black. Jennifer's axis ran through her family—between the Saint Ann's experiences her family could not touch and the family life those experiences could not reach. Three versions of not-fitting, three fillings of the

blank the title leaves open—not a deficiency in the participant, but the structural shape of the position a diasporic adolescent occupies.

The arc works primarily through Colette's sibling-divergence account because Colette's interview surfaces the tactical vocabulary the condition produces with unusual explicitness—heritage-as-calibrated-disclosure, music as a permitted domain of claim because its loss is easier to admit than intimate possession is to defend. Teresa's and Jennifer's accounts configure the same insufficiency register differently and surface elsewhere in the chapter. What *Too ___ To Fit* establishes, through the tactical vocabulary Colette develops explicitly, is that the adolescent condition of not-fitting is not a failure of identity formation but the structural ground on which identity formation, for diasporic adolescents, actually operates.

After the move to Maryland, the way Colette's brother held his Jamaicanness and the way Colette held theirs diverged. The brother foregrounded the inheritance as a differentiator in a new environment that offered few other markers of it; Colette, who had been challenged more directly than the brother had, developed a different vocabulary for what a Jamaican identification could safely be asked to do. I asked Colette how they understood the divergence.

> **Colette:** Yeah, no, precisely. The way I think about it: I know that I've been challenged more by people, and I don't like being tested or, you know, having people necessarily, like, dictate like—
> **Holland:** Like a litmus test every time you have a conversation.
> **Colette:** A litmus test, yeah, yeah. I try to distinguish between, like, "oh, I'm Jamaican," versus, like, "I have Jamaican heritage." Like, people at work will be like, "oh, she's Jamaican, she's Jamaican," and I'm like, okay, okay, slow down, because you're going to get me in trouble. People are going to be like, "oh, you're Jamaican," and then have all these expectations. And so to say, like, "oh, I have Jamaican heritage"—that offers, it lowers other people's expectations a little bit, and allows me to have a little bit more control over what it is that I want to share with other people. When it comes to aspects of my Jamaicanness that I deem important or elements that I want to share, right? Or that I'm not worried about coming under attack or whatever it is. And I think music is one of those things. One of my coworkers one time pulled up a song, and I was like, oh, yeah, I think it was something that

I had heard, but maybe I didn't know who it was. He was like, “you don't know this artist?” And I was like, no, I don't, you know?

Holland: It's like you're an encyclopedia of music.

Colette: Yeah, exactly. I was like, no, like—I really need to catch up. I don't necessarily listen to a lot of Jamaican music. Because what people also don't recognize is that there are many subgenres of Jamaican music. I think of it in the same way as, I'm not going to say, oh, I like all American music. That's impossible for that to ever be the case. So for you to be like, “oh, you're Jamaican, how do you not know this artist?”—well, no, I can also have differing tastes. Even though there are types of Jamaican music I like, there can also be other types that I'm not aware of, don't like, or don't listen to. And so I'm like, we don't even have space for that nuance in the conversation, you know? Because it's automatically, like, you're Jamaican. How could you not?

Holland: Yeah, and I think that also speaks to something you brought up earlier, when you were talking about music taste and consumption, and the fact that your brother was one who was more actively going out and seeking out the music. Maybe making more active ways to find deeper connections to your Jamaican heritage and culture in a way that you weren't maybe as compelled to do.

Colette: Yeah, I think it came later. Like, at some point, I think in late high school, in college, is when I really started to catch up and say, oh, like, these are the songs that I enjoyed growing up. I think it takes me to a different place, right? It kind of allows me to tap into a different aspect of myself. When I started listening to, like, Gyptian—“Hold You,” “Wine Slow”—I feel like that's when I was very much coming into myself as more of a sexual being, and I was able to connect to that, partially because this music just allowed me to connect to that more. When I listen to other songs like it, it does make me feel like I'm more connected to that aspect of my identity that I can't get to very easily through any other means. I remember being in a certain time and place, or being a certain version of myself that is different than maybe who I am in the day-to-day, where I'm not plugged into that. Where I'm not surrounded by Jamaican people, food, and music, because I'm living in the suburbs of Laurel, Maryland, right?

The distinction Colette develops here isn't a recovery of the inheritance but a calibrated mode of holding it—preserving nuance the direct claim would foreclose, returning to Colette a measure of control over which Jamaican elements to claim in which contexts. The final image of the passage—Gyptian's “Hold You” and “Wine Slow” as conduits back to a version of the self the Laurel suburbs have otherwise made unreachable—specifies what the inheritance is for in this configuration: not a restored identity, but an intermittent channel to a dimension of the self the daily environment no longer surfaces. Not-fitting isn't solved by the tactical vocabulary. The

vocabulary makes the not-fitting livable—which, at this adolescent register of the self-work, is most of what holding the identity is.

Too ___ To Fit traced the recognition of insufficiency as a structural condition and the tactical vocabularies that recognition produces. Next, *Partitions* traces a different scale of the same self-work—what happens when the insufficiency is not primarily an identification problem but a daily-life problem, and the partition between home and school becomes the shape of a partitioned self.

Partitions: School Self & Family Self

At Saint Ann's the dances ran on a different canon. Teresa remembers Sandstorm, "Hey Soul Sister," Maroon 5, Lady Gaga, the Jay-Z songs her classmates knew the raps to. Her 8th grade Saint Ann's dance and the dance-dance she went to elsewhere that same year were not built from the same songs. What her weekdays trained her to know was not what her weekends trained her to know. The partition between the two ran through the center of her adolescent musical life. I asked Teresa how the musical landscape of Saint Ann's compared to what she had been hearing elsewhere.

> **Teresa:** Definitely my music taste changed going to Saint Ann's because of the nature of music that they played at the parties. Like our 8th grade dance was completely different from the dance-dance that we went to that year. The music just—
> **Holland:** Okay, so—what stood out for you, for the biggest differences?
> **Teresa:** Uh, a lot more singing together songs, I feel like at Saint Ann's. With the like, "Hey Soul Sister," that song. I don't know why I remember that song. I remember Sandstorm. Sandstorm is the one song that I would associate with our grade.
> **Holland:** The mosh pit.
> **Teresa:** The mosh pit. Um, so, yeah. So like Maroon 5 was a lot of, like the sing-a-songy songs. Like the songs that you could jump up and down to, or that you can know the lyrics to, I feel like was heavily at Saint Ann's. Or like, in the quote-unquote white spaces that I was in. And it wouldn't always be, you know, just R&B or just—I guess that's pop. I guess Maroon 5 is kind of like pop. But they would—they would play like the Jay-Z songs and as

> long as you know the rap like, they play it, but it was few and far between that they would play the more hip-hop songs than the like poppy songs. Like, I remember Lady Gaga being played a lot when we were in like middle and high school.

Teresa's account surfaces the partition's daily shape. The 8th grade dance at Saint Ann's and the dance-dance she attended that same year weren't continuous repertoires; they were two musical worlds she moved between on a weekly cycle. *Too ___ To Fit* read not-fitting as an identity-level recognition the adolescent works out tactically. *Partitions* reads it as something quieter and more structural: a habituated rhythm, embedded in the calendar, in which the schedule sorts which songs to know on which day, the body learns each register at the cadence the schedule sets, and the partition lives below the level of conscious identity-work. What makes the partition consequential is its invisibility as a routine—and the way the routine, weekly across four years of high school, accumulates into the structure Jennifer's account in *Something Lost* picks up, where the weekly division becomes the separation she will name "so separated from my community."

Something Lost: Cultural Reconfiguration & Unintentional Divestments

The chapter closes on loss of a specific kind—not the loss the more visible ruptures produced (those have already been traced), but the quieter kind, the kind that registered at the time as ordinary becoming and discloses itself as loss only through another vantage: the adult looking back, or the sibling reaching for what the participant was not reaching for.

Jennifer's Saint Ann's adolescence, as she looks back on it now, rearranged the shape of her communal inheritance in ways she did not recognize as rearranging while they were happening. Prep for Prep and then Saint Ann's opened institutional pathways her family's Canarsie-based social network did not run on; the pathways were well-trodden, and the well-

trodden-ness was, for her at the time, simply what life was. I asked her how she understood it now.

> **Jennifer:** Yes, I think that's what I was trying to give language to. The Western ideology that I grew up with—and it kind of feels marked by when we moved—I remember my growing up experience decidedly feeling less communal and less village-like than, certainly, my youth, and certainly what Jamaica feels like, what Caribbean communities feel like.
> **Holland:** Yeah, where everyone's just kind of chip in. It's a give and take.
> **Jennifer:** Yes! And neighbors are dropping by, and you call everyone auntie, and you know what I mean. That is really not—I think there really is a friction, and a certain type of code-switching. I can't really call it code-switching because neither culture is the dominant, and it feels like assimilation. It certainly feels like, oh, I'm thinking in this way, oh, I'm thinking in this one.
> **Holland:** Cultural code-switching depending on the space and who's in it.
> **Jennifer:** Exactly. But I do feel like my foundation was brought up a little bit more individualistic than communal.
> **Holland:** It kind of makes sense based on what you were describing—where you live, what's happening around you. I'm guessing also your experiences with Prep and having your school and educational environment separated from your community to a degree.
> **Jennifer:** So separated from my community! So separated from what was possible in my community. And then going to Saint Ann's, right? So much of my identity became wrapped up in Saint Ann's. It was an experience that none of my family could relate to.
> **Holland:** It's just so different.
> **Jennifer:** It's so different. And so it makes even more those sort of individualistic pathways more well-trodden, because I'm having experiences that no one can really—no one has any touch points for within my family.
> **Holland:** So I guess, for you, were you finding that challenging at all? I guess, that disconnect to a degree of, you know, we're part of the same family, but our experiences are so divergent. How are we relating to each other?
> **Jennifer:** I think that was probably the hardest—I mean, not the hardest, I am a trans woman. But I think that was probably one of the hardest schisms between me and my family. And then I'm getting all these ideas about what my politics are, and I'm not a religious person. At the same time, I'm having these experiences that I can't really talk to my family about. I mean, I can talk to them, but they don't have the reference points. And you remember, like, I was so invested in my friends at Saint Ann's. I was so thankful for people like you and Teresa, and everyone who also had Caribbean heritage and was also going through this, you know what I mean? You guys all became my community in that way, and we still were able to share the same or very similar touch points and reference points in that way. But I do feel like—and, you know, I moved to California pretty much right after high school—that was a testament as well to how individual my path had gotten.

"So separated from my community. So separated from what was possible in my community."

Jennifer repeats the phrase, and the repetition does analytical work the language alone doesn't

foreground. The first clause names a felt separation from her family network. The second names something quieter—the shape of a life Saint Ann's made possible for her, which her Canarsie-based family had no way to picture and which their own paths could not have led her through either way. She doesn't frame this as a choice against her family. She names it as a choice whose consequences she couldn't, as an adolescent, see. She sees them now. That adult seeing makes the ordinary well-treading of one path legible as a quiet foreclosure of the others—not dramatic loss, not catastrophic severance, but the kind of loss that doesn't announce itself while it's happening and accumulates underneath.

Jennifer names one vantage into *Something Lost's* register; Colette names another, arriving not through the adult looking back but through the sibling in proximity—actively reaching for the Caribbean music Colette had stopped reaching for. The family-functions material that anchored *Sharing Is Caring(?)* returns here, reconfigured: after the Maryland move displaced the gatherings' weekly availability, the communal layer didn't vanish; it quietly aged in place.

> **Colette:** Absolutely, absolutely. And so a lot of it was whatever was around me, in whatever I could tap into, wherever I was in Maryland, and then what I could remember from when I was in New York.
> **Holland:** Or whatever your brother put you on to, or maybe something you heard at a function with your family and cousins.
> **Colette:** Yeah. I don't know if I—whatever I heard at a function. I don't think that we were necessarily able to go to family functions in the same way that we used to once we moved. But occasionally—like, that summer vacation where I was like, oh my gosh, how does my cousin and my brother know this song and I don't?—that must have been mid- to late high school. Occasionally we were still seeing family, and hearing things that I wasn't necessarily playing for myself. But also because of the age group that was putting on these functions, it was the same music I had always heard from earlier in my life, right? It was kind of older—it wasn't like my aunts and uncles were necessarily tapped into whatever Caribbean music had dropped that year. They were more so playing older stuff that I pretty much already heard. At least at this point in time, when I was a little bit older. And so at that age, or in college, if I heard something that was more recent, like within the past five

> years, when it came to Caribbean music, it's because I went on YouTube and found compilations, or had looked up, like, okay, what has dropped recently? Aside from that, it was like whatever was playing at family functions wasn't necessarily stuff that I was like, oh, let me go and add this to my iPod.

"How does my cousin and my brother know this song and I don't?" Colette asks the question of themselves, mid-summer visit back to New York, and the asking is the subsection's hinge: the moment at which a pipeline's thinning becomes nameable not because the participant has noticed the thinning but because someone else's active reaching has made it visible. The aunts and uncles, Colette says, "were more so playing older stuff I pretty much already heard"; the recent Caribbean releases, when Colette wanted them, had to be sought on YouTube—because the communal delivery system that would have kept them current had, after the move, quietly aged.

The distinction I want to press here is between loss-as-rupture and loss-as-recognition-deferred: loss that registered at the time as ordinary becoming, and discloses itself as loss only through the vantage another position makes possible—the adult looking back at adolescent divergence, in Jennifer's case; the sibling reaching in proximity for what the participant was not reaching for, in Colette's. It is loss, but quiet. Subtle. The kind whose profundity lies exactly in its mutedness—in the fact that it did not announce itself as loss while it was happening.

That mutedness is where the chapter closes. Lost traced the unevenness of childhood, the scalar reconfigurations of adolescence, and—in this final segment—the specific register of adolescent divestment. Adulthood makes that divestment legible as loss, giving participants the vantage points the adolescent self didn't yet have. What Chapter 2, *Found: Relocation & Belonging*, takes up is what the participants, from those vantages, now do—how the rootedness

their childhoods delivered without asking them to hold it, and the branching their adolescences required even at the cost of what got set down along the way, become, in adulthood, the material of a belonging they can, for the first time, address directly.

2. Found: Relocation & Belonging

FOUND

Found traces the channels—the chapter's own word—through which Caribbean belonging is delivered and then taken up. Belonging is not received as a finished product but carried by relatives, routines, and gatherings, and then, in adolescence, by friendships. *Familial Habits* states the chapter in miniature: if the soundscape sat in the walls, the practices that summoned it sat in the hands, and the music and the practices were one thing.

The chapter is organized into two parts, *Childhood* and *Adolescence*. *Childhood* traces the household, the kin networks the household opens into, and the communal and family functions in the driveway and Labor Day on Eastern Parkway. *Adolescence* traces what happens once that material has to be handled, curated, and claimed by the participants themselves. *Found* makes the same anti-developmental move *Lost* does, the strongest through-line between the two chapters. The adolescent turn doesn't arrive on its own and does not arrive at the same age across participants. It depends on several factors such as personal music devices, digital music databases, and peer-facilitated personal taste development. Adolescent individuation isn't produced by the adoption of novel personal taste vehicles; they make it operable.

What *Found* ends on is the peer networks not as backdrop but as differentiated spheres each with its own terms, and the moving between them as a labor of its own. The friendships were what kept the music mattering to anyone besides oneself. Belonging, in *Found*, is built and

then carried—delivered through specific channels in childhood, then sustained socially through adolescent friendships, never individually held alone.

CHILDHOOD

Childhood establishes that Caribbean belonging is delivered before the participants have any vocabulary for what they are receiving. The part is organized into two sections that trace the delivery from the household outward. *Transcultural Foundations* traces what reaches the participants through the household and its closest extensions—the relatives whose presence anchored specific songs, the household activities that summoned the music, and the kin gatherings the household opened into. *Communal Practices* then traces what reaches the participants when the household opens all the way outward—family gatherings in the driveway, the summer block fete, and Labor Day on Eastern Parkway.

What *Childhood* establishes across both sections is that the Caribbean these participants moved through as children wasn't a single source but a layered set, operating across home, kin, and community delivering Caribbean belonging well before anyone had language to describe it.

Transcultural Foundations

Transcultural Foundations traces the channels through which Caribbean cultural inheritance reaches the participants in childhood—the relatives whose presence anchored specific songs,

the soundscapes those songs sat inside, the household practices that summoned them, and the gatherings that opened the household to the kin network beyond it.

Sharing Is Caring: Inter-Generational Transmission

The earliest songs the participants can name almost never come alone. They arrive attached to a person—and to the conditions under which that person's presence made the song unforgettable. Teresa and Sandy each name one. What makes a song foundational, and how its status holds for the listener years later, runs differently in their two accounts. The songs that survive in memory aren't the ones the participants liked most. They are the ones whose foundational status was set by someone else's presence.

The first song Teresa remembers is Machel Montano's "Too Young to Soca," which her aunt played in the kitchen during the period when her parents' divorce had rearranged where she stayed. Her aunt and uncle had taken Teresa's father in after the split, so Teresa saw her father and her mother's Trinidadian family in the same apartment.

> **Holland:** What's the first song you remember listening to?
> **Teresa:** "Too Young To Soca" by Machel Montano. And that is like my earliest memory is dancing in the kitchen with my family to this song. I don't know who started it, who turned it on, who put me on to it, but I—that is, like, one of my first memories.
> **Holland:** Paint me a picture, who's in this space? Like, what do you remember about this specific instance?
> **Teresa:** So, you know, my parents are divorced, but either way, like, they're like, really close besties. So even at the time, when I was younger, their families would still come together to do things. So my mom's side of the family, I had an aunt and uncle who would babysit me, and at the same time during the divorce, they let my dad live with them. So I would go visit my dad, but also be able to see my mom's side of the like Trinidadian side of the family, and regardless of whether she was cooking in the kitchen or just sitting there, you know, reading her newspaper, my aunt would always be playing music.
> **Holland:** That's the one that stood out to you the most.
> **Teresa:** That's the one that stands out, like, even if you asked that same question to my dad and was like, what's the first song that Teresa probably heard? He'd probably be able to

say that exact song, too.

Teresa's father would name the same song if asked, she told me. "Too Young to Soca" is the track both sides of a splitting family agree would have been her first—and would still agree on now, years after. The Caribbean music held across what the household did not.

Sandy (she/her), a Belizean-American high-school friend, grew up on a block of Belizean families—her parents, her grandparents upstairs, aunts moving onto the block as apartments opened. Her foundational song carries the same status as Teresa's by entirely different means. When asked whether any song she remembered carried personal or familial significance, Sandy named one that had recently resurfaced: "Tiny Winy," a track her grandfather had loved, played at a company holiday party three or four years after his death.

> **Holland:** Do any of the songs that you remember hearing have any maybe personal or familial significance?
> **Sandy:** I guess more so now I'd say maybe, like three or four years ago, my grandfather passed away, and he was definitely one that was very big into, like, music and dancing and like, bringing the vibes. My grandfather, up until his last day, drank quite a bit, for better or for worse, but it always made him the life of the party. And so thinking about that, and like the memories of like the music and the songs and the dance, I think that's what came to mind for me when you, when you asked that question, is just one of the songs that he really liked, that I actually just recently heard is called "Tiny Winy." I actually don't know who it's by. I was at my company holiday party, like on Thursday, and they played that song, and I was like, whoa. I was like, wow. I was like, deep cut, okay. But it really shocked me, because I was like, wow, okay. It was the affinity groups at the party that were throwing it, so they were playing more cultural music, if you will. But that's definitely one song that really brings back a lot of memories, because even you know whether it was like 2006 or like 2022, anytime that song comes on, everyone gets, like, super excited. Everyone's dancing, having a good time. So that's definitely one that I can think of from recent memory. I think there's a million of them, right? But sometimes I don't even know what the song is named. I just know the tune.
> **Holland:** It was, like, your grandfather's kind of like, like, playlist,
> **Sandy:** Yeah, yeah, that was definitely one of his go tos.

Sandy's recognition runs through her body, not her vocabulary. She couldn't name the artist or the song unprompted—but the moment "Tiny Winy" surfaced at her company's holiday party,

three or four years after her grandfather's death, she knew the tune. What returned was the excitement, the dancing, the collective shift in a room she remembered from his parties. "I just know the tune," she told me, and named the register this arc tracks. Caribbean musical inheritance lives in the participant not as catalogue but as sonic signature, felt before it is identified. For Sandy, "Tiny Winy" had survived her grandfather as the sound of where he had been standing.

What *Sharing Is Caring* establishes is that Caribbean musical inheritance does not arrive as a body of material to be learned. It arrives anchored to specific people in specific places, and survives in memory as the sound of where those people had been standing. The children were not being taught. The music simply played where they were. *Soundscapes & Musical Discovery* then turns from the individual songs that survive that way to the continuous musical environments those songs played within.

Soundscapes & Musical Discovery

Individual songs attached to individual relatives are only the surface. Under them runs what the participants almost never name by title: music always playing somewhere, through which particular tracks occasionally surfaced. Jennifer grew up with what she described as "tons of different music in the house," most of it coming through her mother, who controlled the household aux.

> **Holland:** What do you first remember listening to?
> **Jennifer:** I feel like I grew up with tons of different music in the house. My mother definitely listened to old R&B, certainly dancehall, certainly reggae. I have a distinctly remember learning what they were saying in reggae songs and being like, "wait a minute, this is filthy!" (Jennifer and Holland both laugh). So (Jennifer chuckles) I've been listening to it for a really long time because I knew all the tunes and the songs. I feel like I listened to really Black

music growing up like reggae, dancehall, R&B. That's what I remember, filling the house, neo-soul like that. I think those all informed my musical taste growing up.
Holland: Was there an artist or a song that stood out to you from that time?
Jennifer: My mother loves some Beenie Man she loved—(Jennifer laughs and Holland joins in), she really was a fan. I mean, she loved old reggae, like, she loved Bob Marley too, she's also a big dancehall fan. And then on the slower side, she loved, like I said, neo soul, the Jill Scotts of the world, the R&B classics. Sade. But, yeah, I feel like that was the sort of eclectic mix I grew up with.

Jennifer can name the artists now—Beenie Man, Bob Marley, Jill Scott, Sade—but as a child she wasn't hearing a list. She was hearing a register: reggae and dancehall on one axis, neo-soul and R&B on the other, both running through the household continuously enough that the music registered before any of its names did. The cross-hatch Jennifer would later carry forward as her own working baseline was, in childhood, not a baseline she was given but the sound of the rooms she lived in.

In Sandy's childhood, no one controlled the household's musical life—because the music wasn't only inside the household.

Holland: What's the first thing you remember listening to?
Sandy: I don't know. I think two things popped into my mind, which are very different from each other. One, I would definitely say like, I guess reggae and soca music coming from parties, like in my driveway. I grew up in Brooklyn so we didn't have a backyard, we had a driveway where we would just kind of grill and hang out and party. So that's kind of I think the first thing that I remember hearing and listening to. I think if I'm thinking about the albums that I owned or listened to independently, the first one I ever owned was No Strings Attached by NSYNC, (Holland and Sandy start laughing), which is very different.
Holland: I mean, I kind of feel like that's just kind of a norm. It's like the mix between American pop and then just like reggae, soca, dancehall, just something.
Sandy: Yeah. So I guess those are the two things. I definitely remember the music that my dad and his friends would play on the huge speakers, and that was more of a family thing. But if I think about the music that I myself owned is definitely more pop—in my case, boy bands, (Holland and Sandy continue to laugh), kind of album.

Sandy names the split directly: what she heard was Caribbean, what she owned was NSYNC. The reggae and soca came from the driveway—the continuous ambient environment of a Belizean block in Brooklyn. The NSYNC album was something she could hold in her hand, play

on her own terms, and call her own. One was communal; the other was personal. This split—Caribbean-as-ambient, American-pop-as-owned—will reappear in *Self Discovery* as the grammar through which adolescent individuation operates. Its roots sit here, in the household.

Where Sandy's split shows that a soundscape can partition within a single home, Teresa's account extends outward. Her childhood ran between parental households, and the partition wasn't between communal and personal but between two cultural worlds, each on its own logic.

> **Holland:** Paint me a picture, like, what was like, maybe like things that you heard like, when you were at home, either with your like, on your aunt's side, when you're visiting your dad, or, like, with your mom. Like, what was like, kind of playing like, what would you hear a lot of?
> **Teresa:** So, uh, the Trinidadian side, which is my mom's side. It's a lot of panorama. Like, pan—is that?
> **Holland:** Like steel pan?
> **Teresa:** I think that might be the wrong word. Parang. I think I'm looking for parang.
> **Holland:** Oh, parang? Ok.
> **Teresa:** The steel pan music. I sound so American, having to work through these words, but the steel pan music like, um...So back then, my mom from age of like, 8-ish to 12-ish. My mom was in Master's school, so my grandmother pulled a lot of the weight of like picking me up from school, taking care of me, because she had school, she had homework. So my grandmother, being the older Trinidadian, was always playing steel pan music, like I don't—those are the type of songs I don't necessarily know each name to, but if you played it, I would be able to say, like, "Oh, my grandmother used to play that song," especially during Christmas time. That was a big time. And then my dad's side of the family, I want to say my dad is a huge music guy. Like, it would be mostly just random songs here and there when he's cleaning the house. He was a huge Jet Lee and Bruce Lee and like ninja movie guy. So I feel like the background I remember is like fighting, with the little movie essences of different songs here and there. But yeah. That—My life was pretty much like cleaning to Soca Music or just grandma cooking in the kitchen and she's playing some music, like, I feel like—
> **Holland:** Maybe like some like Calypso as well.
> **Teresa:** Yeah, Caribbean households is just like cooking and cleaning is when you're playing music.

Teresa's soundscape divides by side of family and by activity. Her Trinidadian grandmother's kitchen ran steel pan and parang through the hours of cooking and cleaning that structured

Teresa's care. Her St. Lucian father's house ran intermittent music against Jet Lee and Bruce Lee soundtracks. "Caribbean households is just like cooking and cleaning is when you're playing music," Teresa put it—naming the principle by which the Trinidadian side kept its soundscape running. Music and labor weren't accompanying each other; they were one thing—and during the years her grandmother was her primary caregiver, that one thing was the texture of the days. The parang Teresa cannot name by song is what her grandmother was always playing, and she knows it when she hears it.

Shanice (she/her), a Jamaican-Dominican friend, grew up in Brooklyn close enough to the Eastern Parkway that the West Indian Day Parade was part of the rhythm of her year. In her childhood, no single household held the soundscape. What kept the music continuous wasn't a place but the routes between places. Asked what she first remembered listening to, Shanice worked through it chronologically. The earliest song she could name was "Baby I Love Your Way" by Big Mountain, which she knew only because her parents had told her she used to dance to it as a child. The albums she actually remembers hearing—not being told she had heard—were Shaggy's *Hot Shot*, Sizzla's *Da Real Thing* (2002), and a 2005 Morgan Heritage album.

> **Shanice:** I would say the earliest, earliest, earliest probably is like, I think the earliest first verse that I can remember is maybe a Shaggy album. Because the first, first one that I remember hearing, that like I was told that I had heard was the...If I can find it, hold on.
> **Holland:** Did your parents play it for you?
> **Shanice:** Yeah, my dad played it for me...."Baby I love Your Way" by Big Mountain but I can't actually remember. That's the only song I probably...
> **Holland:** That's the first one you remember hearing?
> **Shanice:** Yeah, but it's like, not a song that I remember hearing, just that I was told that I dance to a lot, you know? But the other albums are more the ones I remembered actually hearing.
> **Holland:** Which one do you remember hearing?

> **Shanice:** I would say it would be those three albums. It would be like the Shaggy album, Sizzla and like the Morgan Heritage, like in that order.

Shanice distinguished three listening practices from her childhood. First, the carpool: her mother did school pickup, and they'd play a CD all the way through on the drive—which is where an album like *Hot Shot* lived. The school was in Chinatown, with a Mandarin afterschool program; the kids in the carpool were all Black and Caribbean. Second, her father's car on weekends or the longer drives to Connecticut, where he kept a black CD book filled with store-bought albums and burned discs acquired from shops in Queens or from vendors passing through the Jamaican restaurant—he'd let them play a couple of tracks to check the disc wouldn't skip before buying. Shanice would flip through the book from the backseat, and half the time the tracks were untitled, the artist never certain. Third, her father's mix CDs, which played like DJ sets.

Shanice's ambient Caribbean soundscape wasn't produced inside any single household. The carpool was one environment, her father's car another, and the black CD book a third—an archive of untitled tracks moving through a peer-to-peer Caribbean commerce that ran through Queens and Brooklyn restaurants and corner shops. What Shanice's account adds to the others is the architecture: the soundscape distributes across vehicles and circulation networks rather than concentrating in any one place. The continuity is the same; the geography isn't.

What the four architectures share isn't shape but continuity. Each kept Caribbean music in the rooms, blocks, and vehicles where the participants were. The soundscape's defining feature isn't where it lives; it's that it never stops. Whatever holds the music in continuous range of the child is sufficient to transmit the inheritance—and across these accounts, what counted as 'within range' kept widening.

Soundtrack To My Life (Childhood)

If the soundscape is the ambient environment, the soundtrack is what surfaces when I asked each participant to name five songs from their early life. The lists ran short. The titles came partial. The artists were sometimes unknown. But what did surface clustered around the same originating figures and scenes—the aunt's kitchen, the grandmother's Christmas, the mother's car, the father's CD book.

Asked to name five songs for her childhood playlist, Jennifer listed an eclectic mix spanning dancehall, reggae, neo-soul, and R&B: a coconut song whose name she couldn't quite place, Sade's "No Ordinary Love," Beenie Man's "King of the Dancehall," Vybz Kartel & Spice's "Rompin' Shop," and either something by Vybz Kartel or Jill Scott's "Golden." The list reads as a condensed inventory of her mother's aux—the Black Atlantic canon Jennifer would later name as her working baseline, here in its earliest form.

Sandy's childhood playlist paired "Bye Bye Bye" by NSYNC—her owned album—with Beres Hammond, her mother's lovers-rock favorite. The pairing translates the Soundscapes split into playlist form: one song she chose, one the household had chosen for her.

Teresa's childhood playlist, when pressed for specifics, returned to Alicia Keys—the same artist she would name later as one of the two figures who "americanized" her mother's listening. The named childhood soundtrack, in Teresa's case, consisted less of the parang her grandmother played—which Teresa could recognize but not title—than of the American R&B that overlapped with her parents' generation's absorption of stateside pop music.

Shanice's childhood soundtrack was not a playlist she assembled but three albums her dad played enough for her to remember: Shaggy's Hot Shot in her mother's carpool, Sizzla's Da

Real Thing in her father's car, Morgan Heritage in the rotation of her father's black CD book. What Shanice calls a "soundtrack" is a sonic marker of where she was—which car, whose pickup, which drive—rather than a set of songs she asked to hear.

Across the four playlists, the Caribbean tracks belong to a relative. The American pop tracks belong to the participant. The split is already there in childhood—before any device arrives, before any participant has the capacity to author taste—and it will become the grammar of adolescent individuation once they do.

Familial Habits

For the majority of participants, Caribbean music was often paired with certain household chores and activities.

"Cleanliness is Next to Godliness": Cultural Values & Practices

Cleaning was when the household aux came on. In Jennifer's household, it was the Sunday-morning ritual; in Teresa's grandmother's, the continuous condition of daily care. Either way, it was the moment when the Caribbean music the household held became audible to the children moving through it.

> **Holland:** Paint me a picture. What would be happening when music was playing? Was it cleaning? Like those things in the house? Chilling out?
> **Jennifer:** Yeah, I guess we were, during the week, doing a lot of things. So music, like openly in the house, was a Sunday thing. It would be a cleaning thing or families coming over, sort of preparation. But even if it wasn't for an event, it was usually a Sunday morning, maybe even a Saturday morning, but definitely a Sunday morning open all the windows, clean the house thing. Everyone's sort of invested and involved in the process. Yeah, I was just like, "Oh, that was a kind of sweet memory." I hadn't thought about that in a while. But, yeah, it was a big Sunday thing.
> **Holland:** Yeah, West Indian parents are really big on the cleaning.
> **Jennifer:** HUGE on the cleaning! I'm not— (Jennifer starts laughing.)
> **Holland:** Prim, proper, nothing out of place.
> **Jennifer:** I'm not that clean now, so hopefully (Holland laughs), I get there when I get older.

> **Holland:** So for you, it was mostly weekends, Sunday, or while cleaning was when music would be playing.
> **Jennifer:** Yeah, or cooking. We were a big cooking family, especially when I was in I would say maybe middle school, below high school. Again, because I was in so many activities this sort of happened less. And, as you know, I moved to Pennsylvania in high school so I had less time for this. But cooking was a big thing in our family.

Every Sunday morning, Jennifer said, every window opened, the house got deep-cleaned, and dancehall, reggae, and R&B filled the apartment. The music wasn't a break from the cleaning—the two were one activity. "Oh, that was a kind of sweet memory," she said, surprised by her own nostalgia. The music made the cleaning bearable; the cleaning gave the music its weekly occasion.

Teresa's grandmother ran cleaning and cooking as a continuous condition rather than a weekly ritual. Soca and parang ran through the hours of both. Teresa summarized the principle when I asked her to paint the picture of music in the household: “My life was pretty much like cleaning to Soca Music or just grandma cooking in the kitchen and she's playing some music.” When I offered Calypso, she affirmed it and pushed further: “Caribbean households is just like cooking and cleaning is when you're playing music.”

Jennifer's Sunday ritual enacts what Teresa's formulation names. Caribbean domestic order and Caribbean musical practice aren't paired by convention—they are two aspects of one thing. The cleaning happens through the music; the music happens through the cleaning. The children absorb both at once, and each becomes, in memory, indistinguishable from the other.

Hometracks: Early Sonic Immersion

On any given afternoon, the household's musical life was someone's specific decision—a CD inserted, a station tuned, a silence preserved. Whose hand reached for the aux on a Tuesday afternoon mattered more than what played on a special occasion.

> **Holland:** Was your mom the only one who would play music? Would you want to queue things up with your sibling or something like that?
> **Jennifer:** I feel like we were behessed to her on the aux (Jennifer chuckles & Holland laughs.) I don't think we were...I can't imagine that we were adding songs. Maybe later. Maybe like middle school, right? Because, especially at the time we're growing up, it takes a while before streaming starts, you know what I mean? And then, on demand music, like Pandora radio, you're not picking the songs. So by the time on demand music was coming, maybe I was adding music to the stream, but before that, or to the queue, but before that, it was really—
> **Holland:** Like a CD or something somewhere?
> **Jennifer:** It was a CD. It was, you know, her, like, mix tapes, I guess that she had, and then it was albums or vinyl. And, I remember, like, that's where I would learn a lot of my old music. So whenever I knew a lyric, she'd be like, "what you thought about that?" and I be like (Jennifer makes a face and Holland laughs), "you've been playing throughout the house!" But um, so yeah, I think she was, I think she was in control of the aux.
> **Holland:** You said, "you've been indoctrinating me since I could walk."
> **Jennifer:** The entire time! You know how I know this song. (Holland chuckles.)

Jennifer's mother ran a transmission mechanism Jennifer only recognized in retrospect. Play a song often enough that the child knows the lyrics without having asked to learn them; then ask the child what they think of it. Jennifer's recognition, when her mother asked, registered the indoctrination her mother had been running the whole time. Hometracks arrive through that kind of repetition—not because the child chose them but because the aux-holder played them until they couldn't help but know them.

Colette's account introduces the household where music doesn't continuously play. Their mother avoided the aux entirely—said music became an earworm she couldn't shake—and so the repetition mechanism Jennifer's mother ran had no counterpart at Colette's kitchen counter.

Colette: They did. So my dad is very, very much into music. And he sings, actually. So the kind of stuff that he would like play around the house, I remember him like, playing a lot of music in our basement, like we had a basement in our house and he would like, there was a wall that was like all mirrors, and so he would like play music down there, and like dance a lot. And it was a lot of like, 70s, 80s, like disco, pop, R&B. He had a huge, huge CD collection. And one of the albums I really remember him playing was...I don't remember the name of the album, but it's the band New Radicals. I think they only had one album, actually.
Holland: Okay.
Colette: Which is more of, like an alternative, I don't know, like indie pop-rock type of vibe. And so I remember him listening to, like a lot of Joni Mitchell. He really liked Chaka Khan, Dionne Warwick, that kind of stuff.
Holland: So like R&B's kind of in there. Like, 80s, 90s R&B.
Colette: Exactly, exactly, yeah. And then my mom was, I think, all over the place too. Like, I remember listening to like, rock with her. I remember we would like the same, like T.I. songs. Like she would play hip-hop, rock, all kinds of stuff. Not, not so much in the house which like, my mom now tells me that she doesn't listen to music a lot herself because she like, gets bothered when stuff gets stuck in her head.
Holland: Oh, I understand.
Colette: Like I don't know, like it becomes an earworm for her so she kind of avoids listening to music sometimes. Like she listens when she cleans and stuff but she's gone, like, vast periods of time without listening to music. But I remember, like, her playing stuff in the car just on the radio and like, Coldplay. Like both my parents loved Coldplay and like, on road trips, we listened to those CDs over and over.

Colette's account shows that a household's hometracks are shaped as much by who declines to play music as by who plays it. Their mother avoided music because it became an earworm for her—which meant the household's default texture was not musical. Music happened in specific rooms at specific times: the basement on Sunday mornings, the car on road trips, the downtime between activities. Colette absorbed not a single canon but a patchwork—the basement's Joni Mitchell and Chaka Khan, the car's Coldplay, the occasional T.I. on their mother's rotation—selected against the household's frequent silence.

Hitting the Road

The car was where the household's musical life traveled with the family. The road trip converted the ambient soundscape into portable form—mix tapes, burned CDs, flip books, radio stations, Caribbean music available at highway speed. Sandy's family were, as she put it, big drivers—

road trips to Chicago regularly, one memorable trip to Florida, her father working through what she called "that big ass CD album" the whole way down.

> **Sandy:** My, my dad is, was is a big driver. We would drive to Chicago pretty often. There was one time we drove to Florida, and yeah, we would bring that big ass CD album, and he would just go through all of them. So yeah, we were definitely a big car family, and big drivers, like, we would road trip a lot.

Asked whether the music on these drives was her own, her parents', or a mix, Sandy was direct: "It was mostly their songs. I didn't have songs." The music arrived not through store-bought albums but through burned CDs and mix tapes—sleeves thin or unmarked, half the time unclear which side to load. Her NSYNC album was the exception that proved the rule; everything else was inherited from the peer-to-peer circulation networks of her parents' generation.

> **Sandy:** I definitely say like mix tapes burned albums. I don't really remember a time where we had, like, store bought music in that way.

Sandy's car soundscape ran on a specifically working-class-Caribbean-immigrant infrastructure. Burned CDs moved through networks of friends. Photocopied sleeves passed for packaging. The unmarked disc was a functional artifact, not a commercial one. And the road trip—Brooklyn to Chicago and back—was where the infrastructure ran long-form: her father's accumulated catalogue playing continuously, the child in the back not needing to know the names.

Teresa's road-music came through her father's CDs, which rode in a similar flip book and played whatever he wanted to hear. One scene in particular stayed with her.

> **Teresa:** Man, you remember the CDs? That we—They—My dad had the little CD case that we used to keep in the car, so that you could pick through CDs and put it in there. Um, another lady was...What is her name? Alicia Hinds. Roll it. Hold on, roll it...Yeah, "Roll it Gal" by Alicia Hinds is another one that I remember specifically, my dad playing in the car often. I'm trying to find this particular song...I think... "Hot Wuk." Mr. Vegas.
> **Holland:** Oh, yeah.

> **Teresa:** I remember my dad playing Mr. Vegas in the car specifically because there was a time that my uncle—like my dad and my uncle, Desmond, are best friends. I don't—they're really cute. There was a time that we were, like, on our way to, like a mall or something. Like we were not supposed to see Uncle Desmond that day, but we pull up to a light, a random light in Brooklyn, and whose car is next to us? On the street, my uncle Desmond. So my cousins are in the back seat. I'm in the back seat. My dad and my uncle see each other, and my dad is playing Mr. Vegas in the car, and he—it's a red light. He turns it up, and my uncle and my dad get out of their vehicles and start dancing in the middle of the street. And as kids, we're like, "Dad, Dad, what are you doing? Like, get back in the car. You're embarrassing us. Like, the light is about to ch—like, what are you doing?" But like I said, like, when you're a kid, you're like, "Oh, you're so embarrassing. Like, why would my parents do that?" And now I'm older, and I'm like, "Man, he was just living life." Like that, that was probably, like, a great moment for him. Like, he probably had an amazing rest of his day, because he was like, "Damn, me and my bestie, just dancing in the middle of the street."

The red-light scene compresses what the car couldn't quite contain. Mr. Vegas goes up, the fathers step out, and a Brooklyn intersection becomes, for one light cycle, a Caribbean dance floor. The kids cringed in the back seat; Teresa, now, recognizes what her father was actually doing — the everyday audacity of claiming a public street for one song's worth of joy. The moment a friend pulled up beside, the car's music became the street's. Teresa also documents the same burned-CD economy Sandy described: "you know it wasn't real CDs. You know, it was just going on the computer and just burn it all."

Jennifer's mother, by contrast, did not burn her own CDs. She bought them—probably on the corner, Jennifer thought, rather than at a record store.

> **Jennifer:** I feel like she had her two CDs that she would rotate between. She had a best of like, you know those compilations? So one of them was a Best of Dancehall, I remember that. And then if it was a road trip, the radio would get incorporated at some point because I can't do this "I'm listening to the same songs over and over and over again." (Holland chuckles.) My brother was always kind of zoning out so I remember we would be in the back playing games or just being loud or something. Or I would fall asleep, so she would have her CDs on deck. She had more than those two but I remember her always starting with those two. She's singing along, we're singing along—my brother can't sing—but she sings along, I'm singing along, and he's like vibing along, especially if it's on a road trip, like that's your time belt it out, baby. So it was fun. It was nice.

When I noted it sounded like her mother had her staples and everything else was whatever the mood was, Jennifer agreed and added a rule for how the staples were sung along to: "You had to pretend you didn't know the bad lyrics." The bad lines went unsung because singing them meant acknowledging the child had been paying close enough attention to know what was in the song. The cleaning soundtrack and the road-trip soundtrack shared the same logic Jennifer named for her mother's aux more generally: the music played, the child learned it, and the household pretended they hadn't.

Across all three accounts, the car ran on a mix of infrastructures: Sandy's and Teresa's peer-to-peer burned-CD economy, Jennifer's mother's corner-bought compilation, the radio station that took over when the CDs ran out. Each supplied a portable version of the household soundscape—not always the same music the walls held, but a version that could travel at sixty miles an hour. The car didn't interrupt Caribbean listening. It extended it.

Fostering Connections

Familial Habits traced the activities that summoned the music inside the household. *Fostering Connections* traces what happens when the household opens. The same Caribbean music that filled rooms in private becomes the audible signal of gatherings—birthdays, parades, holidays, the wider circle of extended kin and neighbors the household runs out to meet.

Communal Listening

The Caribbean music the participants took for granted—the music whose constant presence registered, at the time, as simply the condition of being at home—is audible to them now as something specific and contingent. That recognition, in most cases, arrived in retrospect.

When I put it to Teresa that the Caribbean music in her account was communal—heard with family, relatives, friends, at the Labor Day parade—rather than pursued on her own, she affirmed it without hesitation: "Yeah, not at all. And I think I just took it for granted, you know? Like, when you hear it in the background all the time, it's just kind of like, oh, okay. Like, that's always going to be there." Taking it for granted named the phenomenological condition of continuous Caribbean listening—the condition under which Teresa, as a child, registered the music as permanent and therefore not worth engaging. The recognition that it could ever not be there would arrive later, in Atlanta, when homesickness made her seek it out for the first time.

Sandy's associations with the summer gatherings on her Brooklyn block were uncomplicated and warm—birthdays, barbecue smells, play cousins over for sleepovers, adults drunk and therefore fun, everyone running up and down the street on scooters and bikes.

> **Sandy:** Yeah, definitely, definitely pleasant memories. My birthday was also during the summer, so I think I also kind of associated those with my birthday and other people's birthdays. I really love barbecues, like barbecued food, so that's always exciting for me. I also liked when, like my cousins and like play cousins and all that, they would come over and we get to hang out and play. I grew up on a block with a lot of boys, I was really the only girl on the block, so it was always nice when my cousins and play cousins would come over because they were normally girls and we could hang out and do the girly things, and I wasn't being bullied by the boys all the time, (Sandy chuckles), so that was always fun.
> **Holland:** It kind of sounds like the quintessential summer nostalgia of good vibes, good times, and looser rules.
> **Sandy:** Yes! It definitely was. I definitely feel that nostalgia and feel that too when you know the music and songs play from that time, I definitely get transported.

The transport Sandy describes is what communal listening does to the bodies that absorb it. The summer songs return her to the summers—not as abstract nostalgia but as embodied recognition, the same recognition that made "Tiny Winy" legible at her company party three years after her grandfather's death. The archive isn't a list. It is the readiness stored in the body, waiting to be reactivated by the music's reappearance anywhere.

Shanice articulates, in her own terms, the same stored archive. She owned a silver radio that played her own CDs, and used it sometimes, but the majority of her musical memories were not produced through it.

> **Shanice:** My childhood is very surrounded by these parades in different senses and like music in that way, it's all like, usually very communal. Like, I had a little—I had, not a little, I had a silver radio that I could play my own CDs and stuff and I would play those sometimes, but I would still say that a lot of my memories of music is more communal, whether it's like in the car, at family, outside.
> **Holland:** It was just kind of like in the space surrounded with other people.
> **Shanice:** Yeah, and like, that's how I would learn music is like, even to today, I know all this old music or, like, old reggae and stuff because it's just like, it's in mixes that I've heard over so much. I still may never know who sings it. I just know all the words for some reason.

Shanice articulates how communal listening produces musical knowledge that exceeds what any particular listening session delivered. The old reggae she can sing without knowing the artist arrived through the continuous overlap of mixes heard in cars, at family gatherings, outside—a cumulative accretion rather than a single learning event. Knowing-without-naming is communal listening's signature, and what it registers is that the knowledge belongs less to Shanice as an individual listener than to the set of rooms, cars, and streets where the music played.

Holiday Playlists

If ordinary time made Caribbean music continuous, holidays made it singular. The same music played, but at Thanksgiving and Christmas it played within an event the participants would later remember by date—and its job was no longer to fill the air, but to be it. Jennifer recalls that her family hosted Thanksgiving regularly until around seventh or eighth grade, after which hosting rotated among different family members.

> **Holland:** Are there any specific memories or associations you have, or certain scenes that stood out to you? Whether it's a large family gathering, holiday, or something else?
> **Jennifer:** I have two. Thanksgiving was like a big time. We used to host Thanksgiving a lot. Then it sort of switched around to different family members. But the preparation for Thanksgiving meals was a big—I mean, because that's all day and maybe even a little bit the day before. So, that was, I remember a big time, and like it's tied to so many senses, because I'm smelling all the food, right? I'm it's, that's a huge, like, eclectic mix time, because that's reggae's coming on, dancehall's coming on. You're really getting all the flavors as you're making all the flavors of the food. So that's a big time. And then another random music memory that just popped into my head was my mother made us record her voicemail and we had to sing a song (both Jennifer and Holland laugh). We had to do multiple takes. Like she (Jennifer laughs) she was like, "You're not on the right part of the harmony." Again, this was very hard for my brother—it was all three of us. It was very hard for my brother, because he can't really sing like that, so he kept messing up the harmony so we kept having to redo it, recording this media. (Holland laughs). I don't know, that just popped into my head. But those I think are really big music memories for me.

She reiterated her music-related memories were tied to cooking and "the Sunday cleaning—that was a big one too but those sort of all blend together." I wanted to learn more about Jennifer's Thanksgiving experience and whether her Jamaican or American heritages had any influence. She replied that:

> **Jennifer:** We would mix so like we would do a ham, right? But there's, like, curry goat, there's roti, you know? It was very mixed because we would also have the American Southern staples, which is so interesting because we're not Southern. But like, you know what the Black kitchen is like. So we'd have American Southern staples but then we're also having quite Jamaican, and there's always a rum cake. Somebody brought a rum cake.

I laughed and joked that someone's always bringing a rum cake from somewhere. Jennifer laughed and agreed with me, adding there's also always an abundance of Jamaican drink staples like shanty and sorrel to re-emphasize how mixed holiday gatherings were.

Where Jennifer's Thanksgiving ran the Jamaican-and-Southern mix through a hosting household that rotated among relatives over the years, Teresa's Christmas ran through one house—her grandmother's—that operated as a continuous open door throughout the season. Teresa's maternal grandmother was her primary caregiver from ages eight to twelve while her mother

completed her master's degree and spent significant time at her grandmother's house. She described it as a lively and warm gathering spot for family and friends who'd stop by unannounced and stay for the food, music, and vibes.

> **Teresa:** I feel like back then, like 12 and younger, it was just normal to hear a knock on the window or on the back door. Never the front.

She recalled that Christmas, which her grandmother hosted, were especially festive and fun times. I asked her if anything stood out to her from that time and

> **Teresa:** Oh my gosh, my family actually just sent the song to the group chat for Christmas the other day. Parang Soca Christmas is a playlist that's now on Apple Music. But it's the exact playlist that I would swear my grandmother used to play. So songs like, it's literally called, like, 'It's Christmas' by a guy named Baron. That's one that I remember. "Santa looking for a wife." That's a good one by Bindley B. Christmas time was just a big time for, you know, people cooking. Family is always going to stop by. That was back in the day where you didn't have the cell phones to call people before you show up at their house. So you just had people pulling up to your door and knocking to see if you were home. So my grandmother had black cake and food on just rotation — knowing that people were likely to pull up to her house.

I asked her who'd typically be at Christmas gatherings, the regulars versus those passing through, and she gave me a rundown:

> **Teresa:** Staples are definitely like, my grandmother worked at my elementary school. She retired, got bored, ended up just coming to my elementary school to pick me up a couple times, and ended up getting a job there. I have no idea, and I remember everyone called her grandma. So she would have her like, the co-worker friends who would come up and always ask for some black cake, always pull up. So I would say that's kind of like, the admin staff of my elementary school pulling up. My mom and my mom's friends, like they know my mom doesn't have to be there for grandma to feed them. Like it's just, that's how they show their love and their appreciation. It's just through food and through baking for you. And then, my father has a best friend whose kids are the exact same age as me. My uncle Desmond would always pull up with the kids and so, me and my cousins would be playing what? Video games, computer games while the adults are in the kitchen or living room listening to music or eating or gossiping. You know that's the big one. Who did what this year? Who did what last year?

Anyone outside that core group was usually a Trini visiting the US for the holidays or someone her grandmother had recently met and invited over. I said it sounded like a classic West Indian

granny situation, and she agreed. She noted that she likes having people over too but doesn't like it when they randomly "pull up at [her] house" without notice—a generational Millennial/Gen Z preference, she said.

The Caribbean identity each participant carries into the rest of the chapter was not, in childhood, an identity they chose, performed, or defended. It was the medium they moved through.

Communal Practices

Here the Caribbean is publicly produced: in the driveway where the sound system gets set up, on the block where the grill draws neighbors in, on the parade route where Eastern Parkway becomes heritage ground for a weekend. The scaling is from private transmission to public claim—from the household to the block, the borough, and sometimes the city.

Family Functions

A speaker gets dragged through a window. Neighbors chip in because the grill is already going. The music doesn't accompany the activity; it is the activity—the audible sign that a gathering is underway. The music here is claimed as a right to territory, however temporary, however neighborly.

Together: Sounds of the Neighborhood

I asked Sandy about the music she remembered her dad and his friends playing on the speakers growing up—when it happened, what the scene looked like.

> **Sandy:** I'd say a mix of both. It was definitely more of a summer time thing. I grew up in Brooklyn, and my family is from Belize, so it was kind of funny because a lot of the people on my block were also from Belize. My mom and my immediate family lived in an apartment. My dad's parents lived upstairs with some of his siblings—
> **Holland:** Like a very communal housing situation? Everyone just really close by?
> **Sandy:** Yeah. My aunts would come from Belize—they immigrated and eventually they would move on the same block whenever an apartment opened up. The other kids on the block were also from Belize. So I say that to say that it definitely was a communal thing where we would have celebrations, whether it was us hosting it or somebody else. We all chipped in, whether it was a birthday or, I don't know, it was just nice outside so we put something on the grill (Sandy chuckles.) I remember we used to have these two huge speakers and we would run an extension cord through the window, plug it in, run it through the window to the backyard, and we'd be able to play speakers from there. Every once in a while, somebody — a family friend, I don't even know who it was — would bring two speakers that were probably four times the size of the speakers that we had, and that's when we knew it was a real bash happening that day.
> **Holland:** (Holland starts laughing) When the full sound systems come out to play (Sandy laughs.)
> **Sandy:** Yeah, yeah. They were painted, almost like graffiti. That's when you knew the real bash was happening.

Sandy's driveway makes the scale and conditional publicness of diasporic Caribbean space legible. The party is Belizean-led but not Belizean-only; loud, but it knows where the babies sleep; it claims the driveway and the sidewalk but not the street. Caribbean cultural production in the diaspora is not, in this evidence, the reconstruction of an imagined island or a wholesale takeover of American space. It is a negotiated, infrastructural practice—extension cord through the window, chairs along the building, speakers at the back—that makes the block momentarily Caribbean without demanding that it become Caribbean outright.

What *Family Functions* establishes is that the household does not stay closed. The music carries the gathering across the threshold, and the gathering carries the household into the street. The Caribbean produced in the family function is therefore not only inherited downward through generations but extended outward through territory, and the territory holds for as long as the music plays. *Touch Road* then follows that spatial extension to its largest annual form, the

West Indian Day Parade, where Eastern Parkway becomes the gathering and the gathering becomes a public Caribbean weekend.

Touch Road: Eastern Parkway & Heritage Celebrations

Shanice's family lived close enough to the Eastern Parkway that the West Indian Day Parade was part of the rhythm of her year growing up. I asked her about her earliest memories of it.

> **Shanice:** It was probably when we first moved when I was, like, 6 or 7. My uncle used to come every year and stay over and then we would do a walk earlier, because they would have the, they still do, but have the kids parade before the adult parade. I remember being very tired because I was just like, this is so much walking, you know?

I joked that everyone was probably walking a mile a minute while she tried to keep up. Shanice agreed and said she didn't realize it at the time, but she was taking in all the sights, smells, and loud music. She remembered "always having her two flags and standing on the side." She explained that, despite being tired:

> **Shanice:** I was trying to take in the moment of what everyone kept telling me—having all Caribbean people together and representing your own, having your own flag and the music and the culture. All of that was very clear to me, even though I had different kid thoughts of, like, so much walking. I still remember that being an important part of it, or feeling like it was something that was important.

I asked what else she remembered aside from the long walks, and she talked about the outfits, the costumes, and especially the preparation. She walked me through the day itself—going down the parkway with her uncle, settling past the walking, taking in how far they'd gone from the house, who was there, what people were eating, what they were selling, the different juices she'd try. She also remembered that the old borough president used to bring out the Mighty Sparrow for the opening float, which she associated with her grandmother, a Sparrow fan. For nearly the first six or seven years, she said, he was announced the same way every time.

> **Shanice:** I think definitely just seeing the different outfits and like, different costumes. And then I think just, yeah, I mean the thing, the preparation. I think that was what I always remember, like the preparation of the flag, the preparation of people coming over, the fact that it was always a couple of days before school, so I would kind of prepare for this and have, and be outside, but then also come in by the late afternoon and, like, pack my stuff for school. So it's like I always remember that being intertwined with like, the rest of my regular life of school. Like my, I guess, culture and history and all of that being kind of intertwined with my everyday like, getting ready for school and stuff, and then also just seeing it as having, you know, it wasn't a whole lot of family, it wasn't a whole lot of family coming, but it was like I would always expect having certain family members there. Like, I remember walking with my uncle all the way down and really, I think once I got over all of that and the walking stuff, like really taking in what I was seeing and how far we've gone from our house, and what are the different people? What were different people eating? What were different people selling? Trying different juices, like things like that.

I mentioned that my grandfather used to take me to the parade too, over my grandmother's protests that it was dangerous because there was always a shooting. Shanice laughed and said the threat of violence was actually her other first memory of the parade. Asked about the prep leading up to the day, she said family started arriving the day before, but cleaning and prep could begin two or three days earlier because the apartment functioned as a place people came in and out of—a rest stop between trips along the parkway, somewhere to eat before heading back out. She explained that the apartment didn't face the parkway, so you couldn't see anything from inside, but people could watch from the stoop or at least hear it from the side. She carried the Dominican and Jamaican flags they already had in the house, and remembered holding onto the barriers along the parkway and doing her "little leaf."

Most years her mom took her; occasionally her grandmother came, more often aunts and uncles. When asked what stood out sonically, she said the smells were the jerk grills and the fish grills, and on the music side she couldn't really parse specific songs from the speakers—mostly just "blaring." But two songs anchored the memory. The first was Patrice Roberts's "It's Carnival," which she called "that main song." The second was "Palance," which she hummed

before we landed on the name. I described it as the all-star song you'll never not hear at a Caribbean party, and Shanice immediately tied it to the choreography—the swaying and waving everyone does in unison. I joked that it was like the Caribbean cha cha slide. From there, Shanice widened the frame beyond the West Indian Day Parade to talk about the other events that shaped her childhood in Brooklyn.

> **Shanice:** No, literally. And then I would say, aside from that, just even just outside of that West Indian Day Parade, I think, just like my childhood is made up of, like going to different parades, or like free events, like the African American parade, like the BAM, like African Festival, and the parade that would like conjoin after that.
> **Holland:** Where was that one?
> **Shanice:** That's usually by Fort Green. By, like, in front of BAM, and it goes down and it has, it doesn't have, like, a full parade in that same sense but it's closed down and then you have different vendors.

The conjoined parade was usually by Fort Greene, in front of BAM—not a full parade in the same sense, just the street closed down with different vendors. I asked if it was like a street fair and Shanice confirmed: a street fair with music, drummers, and dancers running alongside BAM's own performance schedule. She only went to the actual performance once or twice; mostly she went to the festival every year. Shanice tied this back to how she'd been describing her childhood all along—surrounded by parades in different senses, music that was usually communal. She had a silver radio for her own CDs and used it sometimes, but most of her musical memories were communal: in the car, at family gatherings, outside.

> **Shanice:** That's how I would learn music is like, even to today, I know all this old music or, like, old reggae and stuff because it's just like, it's in mixes that I've heard over so much. I still may never know who sings it. I just know all the words for some reason.

The West Indian Day Parade was not a single event Shanice attended; it was an annual rhythm that began two or three days early. The apartment cleaned, the flags carried, the uncle arriving from out of town, the school preparation folded into the same week—the parade arrived as a

stretch of days the household reorganized around. The pattern extended past Eastern Parkway to other parades, street fairs, and events that filled Shanice's childhood with Caribbean culture. Heritage celebrations weren't occasions the household visited; they were occasions the household lived inside.

Childhood highlights how Caribbean culture reached participants without them having to pick it. *Transcultural Foundations* traced what reached them inside the household: relatives anchoring specific songs, household activities summoning the music, kin gatherings opening the household into a wider Caribbean circle. *Communal Practices* traced what reached them when the household opened outward: family functions producing the Caribbean publicly in the driveway, heritage celebrations annexing the street and the parade route for days at a time. Neither delivery mode required the participants to recognize what they were receiving. *Adolescence* asks what changes once devices, displacement, and new peer networks force the participants to handle, curate, and claim that received material on their own.

ADOLESCENCE

If *Childhood* established Caribbean music as a communal arrival participants moved through, then *Adolescence* is where that arrival becomes something participants have to handle, curate, and claim on their own. The shift runs on three material pressures. Personal listening devices relocate music from shared space into headphones. Geographic displacement begins to stratify the daily experiences each participant has within their cultural spheres. New peer networks introduce listening contexts the household never produced.

The second half of *Found*'s organized into two sections: *Constructing Individual Identities* and *"Friendship Is A Burden": Forging New Communities*. The first examines how Caribbean musical taste becomes something participants author once devices and platforms make taste-having operable. While the second investigates how the same music continues to circulate beyond the household through adolescent peer networks, where the moving between differently organized spheres is itself a labor. What emerges is not a break from the communal listening of childhood but its privatization: Caribbean musical identity becomes something participants author rather than something they receive.

Constructing Individual Identities

Adolescence's first section, *Constructing Individual Identities*, gathers the accounts in which Caribbean musical taste becomes something participants have to hold rather than something that surrounds them. The shift isn't developmental—it doesn't arrive on its own, and it doesn't arrive at the same age across participants. It depends on conditions: a device that can hold their own music, a platform that lets them search for a song by name, a social context in which having a taste is legible as self-description. The Walkman, the iPod Shuffle, the iPod Nano, and eventually streaming services do not cause adolescent individuation; they make it operable.

Self Discovery

Each participant remembers the specific thing that first made them ask what their music was. For Colette, it was a piano teacher who wouldn't take "I don't know" for an answer and assigned a

trip to the record store as homework. For Shanice, it was an iPod Shuffle whose randomness annoyed her enough to upgrade to a Nano for the screen. For Jennifer, it was Beyoncé, who did not so much enter her listening as take it over. For Sandy, the question surfaced and she declined to engage it—the communal listening of her childhood was thick enough that a personal taste never became, for her, a hobby worth cultivating. The four accounts answer different forms of the same underlying question, and each reveals something about how adolescent individuation unfolds against Caribbean communal listening rather than away from it.

Earlier in the interview, Colette had walked me through their parents' listening habits—their dad's Joni Mitchell, Chaka Khan, and Dionne Warwick on weekend mornings, their mom's rock and hip-hop on car rides. I circled back to ask whether they'd ever wanted to put something of their own on instead.

> **Colette:** That would be correct. Yeah. Well, I'm just remembering now that I did have a Walkman, maybe in third or fourth grade, and I had CDs that I would like to listen to. I really liked Robin Williams, Robbie Williams. Robbie Williams?
> **Holland:** Robbie Williams sounds correct.
> **Colette:** I think the name of the album was Millennium. He's a UK singer, I believe. So I had my own music that I could listen to as well. I don't remember what else I was listening to outside of that one album, but if my parents were playing music, I don't remember myself being like, "Oh, can I listen to this?" It was more so whatever they chose.

The same blank came up at music school. Colette's piano instructor had asked them what music they liked, and they couldn't name anything—so he assigned them a homework task.

> **Colette:** And so he gave me like, one of my homework tasks was to go to a record store and find music that I liked. And so that's like a major memory I have as a kid because it was like, kind of embarrassing. He was like, do you like Beyonce? Like, what do you like? And I was like, I don't know. And he was like, what do you listen to? And so he was like, All right. Dad, you got to take her to the music shop and buy something and go home and listen to it. And so I actually, we went and I had, I remember buying like, a Chopin CD that I ended up listening to a lot, which like, I guess it makes sense, I went for classical music, since I was in a classical music program but, but I think that speaks to the fact that I also didn't necessarily, even though I had ADHD thing of people ask you what you like and your mind goes blank, even though, right? So it's all of that, but … So that kind of like, made it my task

> to go out and be like, you should know what kind of music you like and actively seek things out and like, have me be a little bit more active in the role that I played in like my own music selection and curation of what I listened to and things like that.

Colette is the only participant for whom individuation had to be externally assigned—a teacher told them they needed a taste, then sent them to a record store to find one. For the others, the push came from a device. Shanice's arrived as a purple iPod Shuffle, and the shift it set in motion was less a single moment than a gradual relocation of where music lived.

I asked Sandy whether not having her own music in the car during road trips was a rule her parents had set.

> **Sandy:** Not that I wasn't allowed but, I don't know, I think even to this day, I don't have a huge personal music taste. I think, especially now with streaming and everything, a lot of people are like, "oh my God, I can't live without music!" Like, they start their day with music, end their day with music—that's not really me and I don't think that has ever really been me. I of course enjoy music when people play it, and sometimes I'll listen to music every now and again, but I think from a young age music wasn't something that was super huge to me as like a hobby in that sense, and more of like a cultural setting.

Pressed on what "cultural setting" meant, Sandy located the refusal within the communal ecology of her childhood Belizean block and the saturated audibility that had already structured her account of *Together: Sounds of the Neighborhood*.

> **Sandy:** Yeah, I feel like music was always the backdrop of family bonding. Whenever music was playing, I knew that we were bonding in some shape or form, or having family time. So I guess that's more of what I mean. I mentioned before we all lived in very close proximity, like we'd pop into each other's houses, see each other outside, and if we were ever together for a prolonged period—and by that I mean like more than an hour or two—then music would always be in the background. So I guess that's what I mean by more of a backdrop to a community setting rather than a hobby for me, where I would actively go and find music. And I guess maybe the reason for that is that there were very few times when music wasn't playing that I felt like I needed to have my own music taste in that way because I always knew music was going to be coming regardless. (Holland chuckles, Sandy starts laughing.) Whether I have it or not, it's going to be there. So I feel like maybe, in that sense, like my music taste was already curated for me which is why, I don't know, I don't feel it much as a hobby.

Sandy's account inverts the structural logic the other *Self Discovery* entries trace. For Colette, the record-store assignment was the moment personal taste had to be externally prompted; for Shanice, the iPod Shuffle was the device that made privatization gradual but real; for Jennifer, Beyoncé was the figure that gave authorship its shape. In each case, the conditions arrived and the participant stepped into them. Sandy names the conditions arriving—streaming, the device, the cultural legibility of personal taste as hobby—and stays on the household block. Her refusal registers not as an absence of adolescent individuation but as a different relation to it: when Caribbean music is continuously communal and already saturated, the move into authored personal taste reads as an optional step, not a natural next one. The communal inheritance, for Sandy, is thick enough that the adolescent operation of privatization doesn't need to run. Her account is the section's anti-essentialist hinge: the fifth participant whose relation to Caribbean music in adolescence is organized by the explicit choice not to author it as hers, and whose refusal makes visible that the others' paths were not inevitable but conditional.

Soundtrack To My Life (Adolescence)

If Sandy named the conditions of adolescent individuation and then declined to run them, Shanice and Jennifer ran them: music's relocation from shared household space into headphones, the specific geography of a boarding-school campus, an iPod Shuffle that became a Nano, and a diva-phase pivot that selectively maintained an inherited canon while reaching for figures the household had not played.

I asked Shanice whether her relationship to music had changed between middle school and high school. She said it “definitely had”—she was listening to more things in her

headphones now. Before the iPod, any private listening had happened on low volume while she was being driven somewhere. Once she had her first Shuffle, and later a Nano, music followed her everywhere.

> **Shanice:** If I was visiting my dad or something like that, I would have this and would listen to it, because most other times I'm being dropped off or something. And then by the time I would have been of age to travel by myself, I went to boarding school. So that was just different. It shifted from something that you maybe listen to when you're traveling or at random times, and now anytime you're outside and walking, you're listening to music.

I said it sounded like the shift had gone from communal to personal, which she agreed with but noted it wasn't so straightforward:

> **Shanice:** Yeah, I would definitely say so. Compared to college, in high school I still wouldn't always be walking around with my headphones. The way the campus was set up, if you walked from the entrance through to the end, you'd pass the academic buildings, then all the res life buildings, and then the sports centers at the top—literally up a hill. So maybe once I started up the hill I'd put my headphones in, but if I saw someone along the way, I'd take them out to say hi. If I was just walking between academic and res life, I wasn't necessarily wearing them at all. That wasn't a thing the way it became in college, where I had my headphones in everywhere I went. In high school it was more situational—studying in the library, sports, before a game. That's when it became personal.

She then went on to explain that studying had its own logic. For most subjects Shanice needed silence, but Mandarin was an exception.

> **Shanice:** When you watch someone learn Mandarin, the first thing you'll see is them practicing the stroke order—writing the character out by hand, over and over. The speaking part comes later, once they've got the stroke order down and the character memorized. That's how I studied. My memories of that time are basically music and stroke-order practice running at the same time. And I think that's why I could listen to music with lyrics—it didn't distract me, because the writing was mechanical. Then when I was done with that part, I'd pause the music, cover the character, and try to say it out loud to practice it. So that's how it shifted a lot.

Shanice recalled a library study session that stuck with her—one where "Juicy" came through her headphones loud enough that her friend Zoe had to tap her on the shoulder: "People could literally hear—they couldn't hear the rapping, but they could hear the instrumental." She used the moment to mark an exception to her usual habits: hip-hop was music she reserved for sports

contexts rather than schoolwork, since most subjects required silence to focus. When asked what songs she'd added to the Shuffle and later the Nano, she cited hip-hop, R&B, and reggae as her three baseline genres, but named "Party Shot" by Popcaan as the single song that, above all others, described the era.

She describes the shift in her own vocabulary—from traveling-only listening to anytime-outside-and-walking listening—and locates it in the specific geography of a boarding-school campus. The device made the listening portable, but what it tracked was a set of routes: dorm to academic building, academic building to library, library up the hill to the gym. Connell and Gibson's doubled reading of the phrase sound tracks[262]—sound as the traces left on particular places, and sound as the routes through which particular listeners move—applies here with unusual precision. Shanice's adolescent soundtrack is both: it records the places her headphones became operable (the library, the hill, the sports center) and the routes she took between them. Jennifer's adolescence runs a different axis. Where Shanice's Caribbean music stayed continuous across the shift (hip-hop, R&B, reggae were the baseline she carried from family into headphones), Jennifer's curation began with a pivot: keeping the dancehall, letting the pure reggae go, reaching for divas her mother had not put on.

I asked Jennifer what she was listening to once she had an iPod of her own and was starting to pick her own music.

> **Jennifer:** I think I kept the dancehall. I think the reggae, like the pure reggae, probably left. And I would listen to more R&B and Pop, like, right? That's when I, or Hip Hop, like Nicki Minaj. I probably wasn't deep into like old school hip hop yet, but a Nicki Minaj, a Beyoncé. Probably—I think this is also when I got introduced to Soca; so I was like, I had a real big Soca moment. But yeah, the things I was going to put on is going to be dancehall, it's going

[262]Connell and Gibson 2003, 1–2.

> to be R&B—love the girls who were singing their hearts out. And then it was probably a little bit more Hip Poppy. And I remember like hip hop was the pop of the time, right? So, so that was when I was really getting into the rap girlies and the, I don't even know if I can say rap girlies because it was really Nicki Minaj for a long time. So, that was when I was really getting into like that.

I named the register: this was her diva phase—Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Nicki, Rihanna. Jennifer's agreement was emphatic.

> **Jennifer:** YES! Rihanna. So, it was very, and that like, that shaped SO much of like my musical soundscape because I was, I was very invested in the divas; very invested.

Three variables move through Jennifer's account simultaneously. The sound-tracks frame established in the preceding bridge makes each legible as a distinct operation on the inherited material. The developmental variable: Beyoncé arrived not as a choice Jennifer made but as an encounter—"Beyoncé picked ME"—that provided a template for what female authorship of music could look like, at the precise age Jennifer was learning to want that authorship for herself. Her mother's rotation had included Jill Scott and Sade, singers who offered vocal mastery and emotional interiority; Beyoncé added the performance of being seen, the demand to be looked at, the spectacle of the spectacle.

What the diva phase delivered was not a new genre but a new model of musical selfhood. The environmental variable: Jennifer moved to Pennsylvania in high school, which is to say the communal ecology of Canarsie—the Sunday cleanings, the road-trip CDs, the block parties audible from 102nd Street—no longer structured her listening by default. The soundscape she had inherited was still accessible through the iPod, but it was no longer ambient. It had to be chosen. The curation-direction variable: Jennifer kept the dancehall she could still dance to, let the pure reggae go because it had required the household's particular density to feel active, and added what her mother had not put on—the divas, and Nicki. The

pivot isn't a rejection. It is a selective maintenance of the inheritance, carried out through the device that made selection operable.

Vibing: Streaming & Personal Curation

By sixth grade, Teresa had an iPod Shuffle, a Limewire account, and a mother playing Usher's Confessions on rotation. The burned CDs her father kept in the car still played when she rode with him, but they had become an elsewhere rather than the default. Something had cooled into habit. The conditions Self Discovery tracked as arriving had, by this point, settled: the device was no longer new, the platform no longer exotic, and curation had become something Teresa did without noticing. What she did notice—eventually—was what had receded. The Caribbean music was still there, but she was no longer the one reaching for it.

Colette's account picks up a related pattern from a different adolescence: the piano teacher's assignment turns out to have been the first instance of a longer arrangement, in which curation is something Colette has to actively make themselves do, even now. I asked her what she was listening to once she had her own device.

> **Teresa:** I think that I really listened to anything that my parents put on until—When did the—? I think I got an iPhone in like, 7th grade, or an iPod. Oh, boom, the iPod Shuffle. That is what I had. It was sixth grade and I remember that you had to download on Limewire because you didn't want to have to buy Apple Music. And it was like, Usher had dropped 'Confessions', and my mom was killing Usher with 'Confessions.' Alicia had dropped that album. My mom was killing it with Alicia. And like, those are the 2 that I could think of that I think americanized my family. I think that, and then on Labor Day, whenever you go to the Labor Day parade, I feel like that's when I would learn my new music, because I feel like we were the first-generation Americans, we started straying very far away from Caribbean music. Because when you're talking to your friends and you have American friends—

I supplied the end of the thought: It's American music.

> **Teresa:** Yeah, it's Jay-Z, it's Beyonce. It's like, you start—I really feel like I started listening to just like, fully American music outside of the house, and then the like, Caribbean music would just be like in the car with my dad or going on the Labor Day parade. And I think—

> Probably, damn, I think when I left for college, that's when I started actively like doing it myself.

Teresa's description here maps the exact shape *Vibing*'s organized to track. The conditions that *Self Discovery* cataloged as arriving—the iPod Shuffle in sixth grade, Limewire as the platform that made downloading free and exotic, an "americanized" household canon her mother maintained—had, by the end of grade school, settled. Curation had become a thing Teresa did without noticing that she was doing it. The Usher-and-Alicia household aux, the Labor Day parade as a once-a-year catch-up on what Caribbean music was doing now, the burned CDs in her father's car as an elsewhere rather than the default—these are the contours of daily adolescent listening for Teresa, and what they share is that Caribbean music is still audible but no longer automatic. Teresa was no longer the one reaching for it. Limewire was what let her reach for what her American friends were listening to.

Teresa's account locates *Vibing* in a curation so habitual that its displacements went unnoticed until college forced them into view. Colette's locates it elsewhere—in a curation that never settled into habit, requiring, each time, the same deliberate act the piano teacher first had to prompt. Colette's account of adolescent listening returns, repeatedly, to the piano teacher's assignment from *Self Discovery*. What began as institutional prompting—a teacher asking what music they liked, a father driving them to a record store, a Chopin CD purchased as homework—had, by the time Colette reached adolescence, become the operative shape of their curation. For Colette, curation isn't what a device makes possible once it arrives; it is what has to be actively made to happen, assignment by assignment, against the tendency for the question of taste to go blank.

Earlier in the interview, Colette had described their parents' listening habits. Their father kept a large CD collection that he played on weekend mornings in the basement, where a wall of mirrors let him dance to Joni Mitchell, Chaka Khan, Dionne Warwick, and a *New Radicals* album Colette could picture without recalling the title. Their mother's listening was more intermittent—the occasional T.I. track or Coldplay album in the car—and she had told Colette directly that she avoided music because songs lodged in her head as earworms she could not dislodge.

Their own listening, by adolescence, had inherited the intermittent quality of their mother's more than the active selection of their father's. Music played when specifically summoned—in the car, during downtime, on weekend mornings when their father put something on—but the household's default state was not musical. Where Teresa's *Vibing* describes curation as a habit that settled so thoroughly that Caribbean music's recession became invisible, Colette's describes curation as a habit that never fully settled at all. The piano teacher's assignment marked the first external recognition that curation was something Colette would have to perform deliberately; what adolescence added was not the automatic operation of that curation but the accumulating pattern of its non-automaticity. Asked what they liked, even as they grew older, the answer could still, at any moment, go blank.

Read against Teresa's, Colette's adolescence surfaces the second axis on which *Vibing* operates. Teresa names how curation becomes a habit so continuous that what it displaces becomes invisible; for Colette, curation remained a deliberate act, each instance requiring the same labor as the first. Both are adolescent relations to the conditions *Self Discovery* cataloged.

For Teresa, those conditions settled into a practice. For Colette, they settled into an ongoing demand.

What Colette, Shanice, and Jennifer share is a device-or-moment that made taste a project: the record store visit, the iPod Shuffle, the Beyoncé encounter. Sandy's account departs from this structure. When asked about her own taste, she said, in effect, that she didn't have one—and that the absence wasn't a gap to be filled but a condition of growing up in a Belizean household on a Belizean block in Brooklyn, where music was always coming regardless of what she chose.

Read across the four accounts, *Self Discovery* is less a stage than a structural problem. The device, the record store, the playlist, the iPod are each instruments for privatizing Caribbean musical inheritance—for converting what was ambient into something authored. Colette, Shanice, and Jennifer each negotiate that conversion differently: Colette through institutional prompting, Shanice through the gradual geography of a school campus, Jennifer through the arrival of a figure, Beyoncé, who gave her a template for authorship. Sandy names what the others' accounts implicitly assume: that the conversion isn't inevitable. Some inheritances are thick enough that privatization doesn't take hold, and Caribbean music remains, through adolescence, what it had been in childhood—a communal presence the listener doesn't have to choose. The section's argument isn't that individuation is what adolescence does, but that adolescence is where the question of individuation first becomes askable. *Self Discovery*, across these accounts, takes both active and passive forms: Jennifer reaches, Shanice upgrades, Colette is prompted, Sandy refuses. Each form produces a different relation to Caribbean inheritance, and a different transcultural self in formation.

“Friendship Is A Burden”: Forging New Communities

"Friendship Is A Burden": Forging New Communities turns from the household and its kin networks to the peer relations through which Caribbean music continues to reach the participants once adolescence places them inside schools, dorms, and conference circuits whose terms differ from the home's. Where *Communal Practices* traced the publicly produced Caribbean that family functions and parade routes made audible, this section traces the privately produced Caribbean that adolescent friendships carry forward, and the specific obligations through which that carrying happens. *Convergence: Stratifying Culture Spheres* examines the differentiated peer spheres adolescents move between, the cultural assumptions each sphere takes for granted, and the friendships through which Caribbean music continues to register in spheres organized around other defaults.

Convergence: Stratifying Culture Spheres

Adolescence stratified each participant's listening across the cultural spheres they moved between. *Convergence* traces what that stratification produced—the acoustic registers that organized adolescent listening into distinct domains for distinct settings—and what carried Caribbean music across those domains: the school friendships through which it continued to circulate. Both arc segments—*Social Modes of Listening: Top 40s Meets Bashment* and *Liming: School Friends & Social Curation*—converge on a single finding: Caribbean music in adolescent peer life arrived through friendships organized in specific ways, friendships that know each

other's business, ask about Christmas, put each other onto things, burden and are burdened. The device made solitary listening possible; the friendships made sure there was still something to listen to that mattered to anyone besides oneself.

Social Modes Of Listening: Top 40s Meets Bashments

Top 40s and Bashments are the two acoustic registers between which adolescent listening stratified. *Social Modes of Listening* examines the specific scenes in which one register carried a song from the other.

I asked Jennifer whether, in the period when she was starting to curate her own music versus being shown things by friends, there were any strong memories that stood out.

> **Jennifer:** I remember being so nice. (Jennifer smirks and does a little laugh.) I remember being on my way to like a Prep for Prep session. This one—in Prep for Prep in fifth grade, you're going to your middle school and then you're also going to Prep for Prep school. So on Wednesdays, after your middle school, you would go to Prep for Prep school, and then Saturday, all day is Prep for Prep. So this is fifth grade. And so because of the frequency, my mother wasn't always able to—and it was in Manhattan, we lived in Brooklyn. My mother wasn't always able to take me, so she arranged for—a lot of the parents would arrange for, like, a van service that picks up all the kids and drops off all the kids. So I remember being in the van one day and "Get Me Bodied" comes on. Now, Beyoncé was my—once I started picking my music, Beyonce picked ME! (Holland laughs.) I didn't pick. Me! And so I was deep, I was deep into the Beyoncé fandom—deep, deep, deep. And I still am! And so I have a memory of "Get Me Bodied" coming on the radio and everybody in the van doing the entire—probably not the driver—but doing the entire dance! (Holland & Jennifer laugh.) And I remember it was one of those, like, three row vans so you had space in the front, and I was doing—my seatbelt that was not on!—the choreography. We all were. I have that memory as like adolescence, but we know the songs that are coming on the radio, but these are songs that we would also have put on for ourselves. That was a big one. I remember when "BedRock" came on, everybody screaming at the top of our lungs (Holland laughs), even when—at parties, like every lunch, it felt like, "do you know this?" Okay, you know what I mean? So those are from that time. Because, again, I'm spending so much time—and this is before I had to move to Pennsylvania—I'm spending so much time still commuting and in transit. And it's also not like I can study and put in headphones, like that time hasn't come yet. So even though I'm curating my own music, it is still like, being able to listen to it with other people via the radio is still the biggest time I'm listening to music.

Jennifer's Prep for Prep van makes the Top 40s / Bashments layering audible in its purest form. "Get Me Bodied" was on the radio—Top 40s, the pop register of the moment—and everyone in the three-row van was doing the full choreography because Beyoncé's album had done the ambient cultural work of making the dance shared property of the cohort. Jennifer's test—"do you know this? Okay, you know what I mean?"—is the Caribbean friendship grammar the section opener named, now operating at the scale of the Prep for Prep peer network. Knowing the song was a prerequisite for being in the van; knowing the dance was how you demonstrated you had been in the van before.

The van was a closed space with the Top 40s station carrying a Bashment-register song into it. Colette's next scene opens onto the inverse—a school gym where the teacher has just walked out, and the Bashment register has arrived without a station having carried it anywhere. I asked Colette about the music they associated with friends during adolescence. Before they left New York at age twelve, the music of their elementary-school peers was "whatever was on Disney Channel at the time"—Mary J. Blige, Ne-Yo, T.I., Cheetah Girls—the songs kids sang on walks between classes or on the bus. But by fourth and fifth grade, the register began to shift.

> **Colette:** As we got kind of later into elementary school, maybe like fourth and fifth grade, when people, when the kids got a little more mature, is when—is also when we were listening to or singing more—I would say like, I would describe it from what I remember as like popular, like Jamaican popular music. Like, because people were like dancing to it.
> I asked if they meant dancehall.
> **Colette:** Yeah. Like I remember, like being in the gym, and the teacher step away, and all of a sudden the kids are singing and grinding on each other and like for each other. You know what I mean? Like and so I know that those were, like those songs were also like—and I don't think that I—but I don't think I was necessarily—I don't remember necessarily like singing along to those songs with my friends but it was music that I knew and music that I enjoyed, but I participated in it in a different way than some other people did, right?
> I asked how.
> **Colette:** Well, I mean, I think like in the sense that I wasn't, I wasn't, like dancing to it the way that they did. I think that it did reflect kind of like for me at that time, maybe a certain

> level, because of what I was witnessing, a certain level of like maturity or like sexuality that developed for a lot of other people in my—that I recognized around me in like, fourth and fifth grade. Like, at that point, kids were talking about like, intimacy and like the things that they wanted to do to each other and dadadada. And I very much stayed away from that because I was like, oh, I'm a good kid. I don't know what's going on, right? And so I didn't participate in like, some of the connections that people like made to this kind of music in the same ways but that wasn't all of the music, right? Like, there were also songs that I recognized from, like, being at family functions with cousins, aunts, uncles, whatever. Like being at weddings or whatever it was where I was like, okay, yeah. Like, not all of it was necessarily like, inappropriate, but I think some of the songs that went double platinum in the gym at school, they were.
> **Colette:** Elephant Man, like? And I don't remember what the song was, but that was like really, that was, that was a big one. Like a dance hit for sure.

Colette's gym scene names the conditions under which the Bashment register intrudes into institutional space. The teacher stepped away; the music changed; the kids started dancing in a way the institution would have recognized as inappropriate if the teacher had returned. What is telling in Colette's account isn't the dance but their position relative to it—present in the gym, recognizing the music from family functions, enjoying it without participating in the sexualized peer register the dance had taken on. Colette knew the music but declined the specific friendship-grammar that dance performed, and so declined the friendships that register was the entry to. The stratification the opener named operates here too, but differently: the Bashment register arrives, and Colette chooses which of its social functions to take up.

Sandy's scene isn't a site where Caribbean music briefly intrudes. It is the site where Afro-West Indian cohort itself is the carrier, at schools whose institutional character was overwhelmingly Top 40s. I asked Sandy whether the Caribbean music she grew up with had helped connect her to her cultural identity.

> **Sandy:** Um, for sure. I think in parts, yes like—internally like amongst us—I never know if it's inter or intra, whatever, whichever one it is—but amongst us, for sure, but I felt it helped me connect with my identity even more so when I was not within my community in that way. So, like, when we would be at school, like at Brooklyn Friends School or St. Ann's, I think having the music that I grew up with allowed me to make friends on a deeper level

> than if I didn't have that music—and that's what I guess I mean like more externally than like amongst my family members. I think the music that I listened to allowed me to not only develop my own identity, but develop an identity with strangers, and go from strangers to friends in that way.

I agreed, naming the way the music had operated as the staple of my own friend group at Saint Ann's—the thing that kept us together through factions, contention, the ordinary social churn of an independent school.

> **Sandy:** Absolutely, absolutely for thick or thin, right? (Holland chuckles.) Like, we can sit down and listen to music and be like, "Oh my god, I love that song!" and dance and laugh and repeat.
> **Holland:** Yeah, no, exactly. Or, like, even when we would go to, what was it, the DAIS conference and stuff—
> **Sandy:** (Sandy starting laughing) Yes!
> **Holland:** And half the music would either just be hip hop or dancehall or soca (Sandy laughs) or something in between, but it very much gave you that really clear understanding of the community being based around cultural identity, and in large part, music.
> **Sandy:** Totally. I totally, totally agree.

Sandy makes explicit the logic earlier entries enacted without naming. At Brooklyn Friends and Saint Ann's—independent schools whose institutional culture ran in Top 40s—the Caribbean repertoire was not the default, and its presence in a friendship was therefore a signal. Recognizing a song someone else grew up with, dancing to it in the same way, knowing the deep cuts the Belizean block or the Jamaican household had made ambient—these were shorthand for a cultural belonging the institutional culture did not register. Caribbean friendship across the Afro-West Indian cohort at these schools was built through the music, not alongside it. DAIS and SDLC parties were where that cohort converged across schools, and the music that played—dancehall, soca, hip-hop interspersed—was the audible architecture of the network Sandy names. Friendship was the burden; the music was the currency; the conference was where both came into public form.

Same conference circuit, different entry point. Teresa arrived at Saint Ann's from Prep for Prep—a pipeline whose own default register had been Caribbean and Hispanic rather than the Maroon 5 and Sandstorm that ran at her new school. I asked Teresa what stood out about the SDLC and DAIS parties of the adolescent conference circuit.

> **Teresa:** Yes, like, I tell my boyfriend of the parties we went to, like, SDLC, DAIS. Like, the fact that the chaperones were kind of being chaperones, but they still let us do what we do. I think like, those moments like, really shaped—like I look back now and I'm like, dang, like that really shaped our lives.

Elsewhere in the same interview, I had asked Teresa about the register shift between Prep for Prep and Saint Ann's, and she had mapped the two acoustic worlds precisely:

> **Teresa:** Prep for Prep is, like, they—I know they didn't do this on purpose, but, like, tri-state area is probably just really heavily Caribbean. But Prep for Prep was, like, mostly Hispanics and Caribbean kids, or at least the ones that I was around.

At Saint Ann's, the register changed. In Chapter 1's *Something Taken*, Teresa traced how the music she was exposed to Saint Ann's—which she classified as one the main "white spaces" she was a part of catered to homogeneously pop (read: "white") group dance and sing-a-long songs—i.e., "Sandstorm," "Hey Soul Sister," Maroon 5. Here, she further complicates the narrative by adding another layer: the Top 40s/Bashments layering wasn't simply a daily shuffle between sociocultural listening modes but an institutionally-mediated sonic environment shift. Prep for Prep defaulted to Caribbean and hip-hop; Saint Ann's to Maroon 5 and Sandstorm; the SDLC and DAIS weekends were where the Prep for Prep register, scattered across the Saint Ann's-and-equivalent cohort, briefly converged into shared public form. For Teresa—as for Sandy—the conference circuit was not merely a party circuit. It was where Caribbean friendships built across distance and institutional registers came into the same room.

The four sites—the Prep for Prep car pool van, the elementary-school gym, Brooklyn Friends–Saint Ann's Caribbean friend groups, the SDLC and DAIS conferences—represent sites where adolescent belonging branched outward through specific forms of Caribbean peer-to-peer dialogic engagement. What the accounts hold in common is that Caribbean music in adolescence was not displaced by the institutional Top 40s register of the independent school or the private-school commute. It circulated alongside it—audible in specific scenes, sustained through specific friendships, carried by the grammar of give-and-take, knowing, and mutual burdening those friendships ran on. The Prep for Prep van, the gym after the teacher stepped out, the Saint Ann's cafeteria table, the DAIS dance floor—these are the scenes where the adolescent Afro-West Indian self extended outward into peer belonging, and the Caribbean music audible in each is the sound of that extension happening.

Liming: School Friends & Social Curation

A Friday night in a boarding-school dorm upstate. A laptop on the bed. YouTube loading. Shanice and her friend Kiki watching footage of a Brooklyn dancehall party neither of them is old enough to attend—entrance music swelling as the first dancer enters the frame, song titles neither recognizes yet, the two of them leaning in to catch what the DJ is playing. This is liming, in the Caribbean idiom: the unhurried between-event, the friends hanging out in the space between one function and the next, the casual stretch in which no event is happening and, precisely because no event is happening, the work of sustaining a shared musical world is what gets done. I asked Shanice where she first heard "Party Shot" and the other songs she had named as defining that era.

Shanice: They used to have these—I mean, I wasn't allowed to go to them, and I didn't go to them, but like, they used to have these parties that then would end up on YouTube. And so then you would watch YouTubes.
Holland: This was high school?
Shanice: Yeah, it wasn't at my high school but it was in New York, and people would go on the weekends.
Holland: I wonder if those were random fest, like a rando fest kind of party, like that sounds like it would be.
Shanice: Maybe, maybe, yeah. But we would, that would be kind of, me and my friend Kiki and I would watch. That would be like our Friday night in boarding school—we would watch in our dorm like the party footage back on YouTube. Which, like, I think probably in all of that, maybe they went to one or something. And then I had—my friend Addis went to one. But, like, no, most people you know probably had never even been to one. But like, everyone has seen the footage, from the parties. So like, that would be kind of a thing that you would watch. And that was, and those were, like, dancehall parties in New York for, like, largely, it's, it was like high school students, students from Brooklyn and stuff like that that we probably never, collectively, most of us never went to but it was like everyone knew about the parties, you know? So, um, yeah, because my—the way my curfew was set up, I was never gonna go, even if I extended like that, those parties didn't end until like, 3, 4 AM, so me at 15 was never going.
Shanice: Yeah, but yeah, I remember that being like, a very core part of like both how we found out about music new like, especially I feel like, but really for anything but especially because they were largely like dancehall parties. Like, that's A, how we found out about music, because it would be like their entrance music because that was the first time before anything that I heard "Party Shot" was in one of those videos and then I was like, and then we all started playing it and the I-Octane. Either I love, not I love my life something. Let me find it.
Holland: I know what song. If you say it's "I love my life," I know which one you're talking about, but.
Shanice: You think it's, I'm trying to remember. No, it's "Love Di Vibes." Yes, though like "Party Shot," "Love Di Vibes" and "Caribbean Girl," Aidonia. Those three.

The Shanice-and-Kiki scene makes visible liming as a mode of adolescent music discovery that operated at one remove from the event it depended on. Shanice and Kiki were not at the Brooklyn dancehall parties. Neither were most of the peers who knew the songs the parties had made circulate. The parties operated as off-site cultural production whose output—the footage, the entrance music, the choreography, the moments of collective release a DJ created—became accessible through YouTube to the dorm rooms of a boarding school Shanice had gone to partly to be elsewhere than Brooklyn. The Friday-night ritual with Kiki was where

that output was processed: watched, discussed, collectively adopted, then played again later when the songs found their way to the dorm's own social life. "Party Shot" became a song Shanice knew because she and Kiki had watched it arrive in a video together. The friendship was the carrier; the video was the material; the dorm room was where the adolescent West Indian peers world continued to assemble in the space between anything that looked like an event.

Liming at one remove gives way, in Teresa's account, to liming at ordinary proximity. Jeff and Hector weren't parties Teresa watched on YouTube from upstate. They were friends at Saint Ann's, in the same hallway, whose recommendations Teresa absorbed continuously enough that she describes her adolescent music taste as almost entirely derivative of theirs. I asked her what she was listening to in high school—and what she remembered hearing her peers listen to. Her answer acknowledged an eclectic range—Usher, Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Nicki Minaj—but then redirected:

> **Teresa:** I do this thing with music where I don't think that I actively pursue music the same way that the people around me do. Like, I think I kind of wait—aside from, like the Caribbean music now, because I don't have a lot of Caribbean friends around me. Just the nature of Atlanta. I literally just wait for my friends to kind of like, tell me that an album is dropped. Or tell me, "Oh, like, I've listened to this song." Like, I think I relied a lot on Jeff and Hector in high school to tell me, like, "Oh, like, Drake just dropped this new song. It's so fire." "Oh, like, this person just drops and they're coming to New York. They're fire." "Oh, listen to this on SoundCloud." And I think that's like, how my music kind of, like—my music taste is a combination of all my friends' music taste.

Teresa names the internal structure of liming that Shanice's—mediated by YouTube—had enacted at a remove. Jeff and Hector aren't at a separate site from Teresa; they are at Saint Ann's with her. What they provide isn't footage but recommendation—the casual "Drake just dropped this new song," delivered in the register of friendship, which Teresa absorbs into her own listening without, as she notes, pursuing music the way they do. The give-and-take the

Caribbean friend groups require doesn't require symmetry in what gets given. Teresa gives presence, memory, years of Saint Ann's and SDLC and DAIS—and receives, in return, the compilation of tastes that her own taste turns out to be. For Teresa, the burden of friendship and the availability of Caribbean music are the same availability.

Read alongside *Social Modes of Listening*, liming makes visible that the adolescent Caribbean musical world in these accounts is one specific friendships hold in place between scenes. Shanice watched Brooklyn dancehall parties with Kiki; Teresa listened to what Jeff and Hector told her to; the boarding-school dorm, the Saint Ann's commute, the SDLC dance floor, the Prep for Prep van all operated as sites where the Caribbean friend group grammar extended the adolescent Afro-West Indian self outward into peer belonging. What the friendships carried was not a generic adolescent music taste but a specific one—the one give-and-take, knowing, and mutual burdening made available. Through Jeff and Hector, Teresa reached SoundCloud drops and Drake singles; through Kiki, Shanice reached “Party Shot” and “Love Di Vibes” before either of them was old enough to be at the parties those songs had come from. The adolescent branching of Caribbean musical life, in *Convergence*, runs through those specific friendships.

Across Chapter 2, *Childhood* and *Adolescence* traced Caribbean belonging through the lens of discovery, exploration, and the gradual extension outward of a Caribbean self into the world the participants were growing up in. *Childhood* rooted that self in the household, the block, the grandmother's kitchen, the driveway bash, the Eastern Parkway; the Caribbean arrived continuously, ambiently, through everything around the participant. *Adolescence* branched that self outward through two co-operating registers: *Constructing Individual Identities*, where the personal listening device made Caribbean musical taste something the adolescent could author

rather than only absorb; and *Convergence*, where the stratification of peer spheres across institutional settings made Caribbean music circulate through specific friendships organized around give-and-take, knowing, and mutual investment. What *Found* doesn't take up is the question of what this belonging becomes when the communal apparatus thins. That is what *Liminality* asks: what it takes to keep being the self *Found*'s traced growing into being.

3. Liminality: Situating Cultural Transmission

LIMINALITY

Chapter 3 takes up what Chapters 1 and 2 leave unanswered: what becomes of Caribbean belonging once adulthood removes the conditions of its automatic supply. Across childhood and adolescence, the participants absorbed and then began to author the Caribbean culture that reached them—through relatives, households, neighborhoods, devices, and friendships. By adulthood, the relatives have passed or scattered, the households have dispersed, the venues have closed. What replaces them is the participants' own continuing effort to hold Caribbean belonging in place, on contested ground.

The chapter argues this in two parts. *Cultural Capital & Legitimacy* traces the contested terrain adult belonging now stands on: who counts as legitimately Caribbean, who is permitted to claim what, and the pressures queer and trans participants navigate within Caribbean spaces shaped by colonial law and church doctrine. *Present* then turns from what the landscape does to participants toward what participants do inside it: the everyday practices through which they preserve the music, foodways, language, and rituals childhood once delivered without their effort, and the practices through which they locate or build the spaces where Caribbean cultural life still registers as home.

What *Liminality* demonstrates across both parts is a single structural shift: in adulthood, belonging is no longer something the participants inherit but something they actively build.

CULTURAL CAPITAL & LEGITIMACY

The question, "What gives someone the right to claim Caribbean identity when they have never lived there?" recurs across the interviews that follow, and the answers it produces aren't what a legitimacy-as-inheritance model would predict. This section examines how Afro-Caribbean Americans construct—rather than inherit—their claims to Caribbean legitimacy, and how the same construction is audible in the work of Jamaican singjay Shenseea and British-Jamaican artist Stefflon Don. Participants and artists alike describe a practice of active cultivation: pedigree acquired through deliberate listening, fluency performed at concerts and family gatherings, belonging negotiated with audiences whose recognition is never automatic. Read together, the interview and production sides don't merely reflect a legitimacy already secured; they participate in producing it. In the diaspora and on the dancehall stage alike, Caribbean legitimacy is a claim made under negotiation rather than a status conferred at birth.

Clashes: Revisiting “Too _____ To Fit”

The "Too ___ to fit" frame—introduced in Chapter 1's *Distinguishing Identities* section as an adolescent condition of not-belonging—names the recurring structural position that Afro-Caribbean Americans occupy across overlapping communities of belonging: too diasporic to read as fully Caribbean, too Caribbean to read as fully Black American, too queer or too gendered or too foreign-inflected to read as fully anything in particular. The frame's analytical purchase is

that the blank is mobile—what fills it shifts by context, interlocutor, and audience—while the grammar of not-quite-fitting holds steady. Chapter 2 set this frame aside to examine what gets assembled in its place: the transcultural foundations, communal practices, and early sonic immersion through which Afro-Caribbean American children build a sense of belonging that isn't merely the absence of not-fitting. This section revisits "Too ___ to fit" under sharper pressure and at a later life stage.

Where Chapter 1 mapped the "Too ___" frame as something adolescents were navigating—school self and family self partitioned, cultural uprooting registered as loss—*Clashes: Revisiting "Too ___ to fit"* reads the same frame as a condition adults are actively constructing legitimacy against, on the listening side in the first subsection and on the performing side in the second. The shift from adolescence to adulthood matters: it's the shift from experiencing the frame as an imposed position to working the frame as a site of active cultural labor. The asymmetries *Clashes* surfaces between audience and artist, island-born and diaspora-born, fluency and its performance, are where the chapter's argument about pluralized identity gets its traction.

Identity Crisis: Fighting For Legitimacy & Belonging In The Caribbean Diaspora

This arc gets at a question most of my participants carried in one form or another: what gives you the right to claim Caribbean identity when you've never lived there? The conversations kept circling back to music knowledge as a kind of litmus test—an implicit way of measuring how connected you really are.

In/Outsider: The Acrobatics of Belonging

Sandy's reflections on cultural legitimacy surfaced through a contrast she drew between her own listening practice and that of her younger cousin—her mother's sister's daughter—who had grown up in Belize. Where Sandy described herself as holding an amalgamated relationship to Caribbean music across the region, her cousin's consumption was narrower and more rooted: centered on Belizean music, calibrated to the country rather than the diaspora. The exchange is useful here because it names, from the audience side, the same asymmetry that "Be Good" and "Clockwork" will make audible on the production side: diasporic listeners and island-raised listeners arrive at Caribbean music through structurally different relationships to it, and the difference shows up in what counts as the unit of cultural belonging—a country, or a region held together by migration.

> **Sandy:** Yeah, I guess I think of my cousins—my mom's sister's kids, they grew up in Belize. They're very much into music, they listen to music all day, every day. They're girls who, opposite to me, need music all the time, and they're much younger than I am. The oldest is maybe seven years younger, which is a large enough difference, I think. But I think about how I would listen to music, and I would still share music with her, especially with her being from the Caribbean, and we would share music as much as we could. And I think I felt most like a part of the diaspora and like an immigrant to New York, because I would kind of have this amalgamation of what I listen to as Caribbean music. But since she grew up in Belize, she is less focused on this larger amalgamation and more on the music that comes from Belize. And yes, the Caribbean is small, and the genre isn't very wide or large, and she would still of course listen to music from other countries and things like that, and certainly more up to date than I think we were, but...I guess maybe that's the distinction—as a New Yorker, you think of all Caribbean music as your own, and the combination of all music from all countries as one genre maybe feels to me more like a New Yorker than thinking about my cousin who grew up in Belize and was more focused on Belizean music. Does that make sense?
>
> **Holland:** That actually makes a lot of sense. In you describing that, it's actually an interesting thought process—okay, yeah, there's this maybe claim to a universal Caribbean music versus a specific, let's say, regional or local style or sound.
>
> **Sandy:** Yeah, yeah. And not to say that people from Belize don't listen to artists from Jamaica or Trinidad or whatever it is. But I think there is a little bit more of a distinction.
>
> **Holland:** That makes a lot of sense. It's in the same way—New York hip-hop is different from Chicago hip-hop is different from LA hip-hop, Atlanta, you know. There's a regional

> distinctiveness that makes it its own, and while everyone listens to other types of hip-hop, even from New York, you might have a bigger lean or preference towards New York hip-hop than some of the others.

What Sandy names here isn't a deficit model of diasporic listening but a difference in the unit of cultural belonging. Her cousin's relationship to Belizean music is country-anchored because country-raised; Sandy's relationship to Caribbean music is region-anchored because diaspora-raised—the New York Caribbean community, with its Jamaican, Trinidadian, Guyanese, Grenadian, Bajan, and Belizean overlaps, produces listeners for whom the region, not the country, is the native unit. This is where the audience-side parallel to Shenseea's position becomes legible. Shenseea, island-born, operates from within a single-country authenticity frame the way Sandy's cousin operates from within a single-country listening frame; her patwa is calibrated to that frame and then, in the crossover work, recalibrated outward toward the region and the international market.

Sandy, diaspora-raised, already listens at the regional scale Shenseea's crossover work is being pulled toward—which is part of why diasporic listeners can experience Shenseea's crossover both as an opening up of Caribbean music to their own aggregative listening practice and as a dilution legible only from the single-country position Sandy's cousin occupies. The same move reads as expansion from one side of the Atlantic and as loss from the other. Sandy's contrast with her cousin makes the diasporic position audible as a position, rather than as a deficient approximation of the island-born one—and that is the audience-side precondition the Shanice and Colette material below will extend.

Musical Litmus Tests

Shanice and I talked about what it feels like to claim Caribbean identity when you've never actually lived there. She didn't frame it as not being Caribbean—more that outside pressures, from society and even from people close to her, made her feel like she shouldn't claim it all the way.

> **Holland:** You were talking about cultural legitimacy and feeling as though you can't fully claim the Caribbean identity, but you also still relate to it, and there's some kind of distance between the two. Want to pick up from there?
> **Shanice:** Yeah, sure. I don't think it's that I can't claim it. It's that you're made to feel like you shouldn't—that you can't claim it all the way—by society and by people closer to you. The first basis isn't living there. But you move through that a lot easier once you remember: if your parents could have stayed there, they would have. I had that for a second a couple years ago, especially as I was getting deeper into my own research, but I got through it. So it's not that you don't claim it. It's that there are other pieces that complicate the feeling—certain languages, certain cultural knowledge. And definitely with the queer identity, feeling like, "oh, maybe there is a potential that you'd want to go back," but then what would that actually look like? That dampens what you're feeling. It was something I never really questioned about myself, even coming into my queerness—I never questioned that I wasn't Caribbean. But when it's put together with not growing up there, there are certain levels of ambivalence—not towards your Caribbean-ness, but towards how you establish that true linkage.
> Holland: Yeah, that makes complete sense, especially because there are too many variables to just be like, "oh, I can fully claim this." If I do, then what are the implications compared to someone who grew up there, who is fully immersed? There's that whole foreign-born versus native-born dichotomy that comes into play, where someone is always questioning your legitimacy to that claim to some degree.
> Shanice: Yeah, exactly.
> **Holland:** So how do you self-identify?
> **Shanice:** In terms of ethnicity, or just queerness?
> **Holland:** I would just say cultural identity.
> **Shanice:** When people ask me, I'm Caribbean—that's just my experience. So I'll say, "oh, I'm Caribbean," because that's how I feel. And you don't have to guess that I'm Black, so obviously, I'm Black and Caribbean. When it comes to other terms, I'm just from New York. New York is in America, but you don't always say "I'm Black American" in the same way. Maybe that's also because I'm in community with people who are African American—from the South and the Midwest—who have different experiences. But it's not in a way where I'm afraid of being called African American. If someone calls me that, I'm not going to correct them and say, "I'm Caribbean." In terms of how I self-identify, though, Caribbean is the most comfortable for me, because it's the same experience but also a different experience—not in a hierarchical way, just different.
> **Holland:** Not fully in that Caribbean sphere, but also not fully in that Black American

sphere.
Shanice: Yeah.
Holland: Because even within those, they're very distinct entities themselves.
Shanice: Yeah. And I think sometimes generationally it can be confused, because in a previous generation, there was tension between African Americans with ancestry from the South and people with ancestry from the Caribbean. That tension might have shaped how people thought about these identities before. But that's not why I feel the way I do. The reality is that all those things would mean I'm Black American, but there's still some distance from me using that as the first term, because it's just not my full experience, even though I'm obviously American. I have that ambivalence, and I don't feel uncomfortable with it. I feel like I'm responding to the fact that other people may see it and think, "oh, you're distancing yourself from it." But it's hard to explain.

This led into a broader conversation about what it actually means to "know" Caribbean music, and how diasporic and generational distinctions complicate the inheritance of that knowledge.

Shanice's relationship to Caribbean music is mediated almost entirely through her father, a lawyer who immigrated from Jamaica and worked as a music journalist for BET and Jet in his twenties and thirties while practicing law. His eclecticism—roots reggae alongside Lucky Dube alongside Billy Joel—shaped the listening environment Shanice grew up in, and his habit of narrating the backstory of whatever came on shuffle during their car rides became, as she put it, “just a natural part of our relationship.” What struck me was how she framed this as both a gift and a kind of curriculum. Her father wasn't just playing music; he was teaching her a lineage. Through him, she learned to recognize the Abyssinians, Steel Pulse, and early Bob Marley "where his voice hadn't dropped yet"—a catalog of roots reggae she can draw on at concerts and community events as evidence of her cultural fluency. "The music definitely makes me feel connected," she told me, "because it feels like I still know this, and I'm still rooted in this, even though I'm in a completely different place."

What interested me was what happened when I pushed on the concert experience specifically. I described something I'd noticed at Caribbean concerts I attend: the moment when a

DJ or band drops a track and the entire crowd sings along, and the shared knowledge of the lyrics functions almost as an implicit test of belonging. If you know it, you're in. If you don't, the gap is felt. Shanice recognized what I was describing immediately. "Exactly!" she said—and that recognition between us, two second-generation Caribbean people who had both felt that tension, opened up a broader conversation about what musical knowledge actually proves, and for whom.

I shared that my own grandparents played certain staples—my grandmother's Natty Dread Christmas album is practically a holiday institution—but that their catalog didn't necessarily overlap with what gets played at concerts or circulates as common cultural knowledge among younger Caribbean Americans. The generational layers matter: what Boomers play, what Gen X absorbed, and what zillennials like Shanice and I inherited aren't the same repertoire, even within the same family.

Shanice amplified this point by reframing the historical context entirely. "What you have to remember," she said, "is a lot of this popular reggae music, when it came out contemporaneously, was like weed-smoking, rebel music." Her observation recast what now reads as canonical—Bob Marley, roots reggae, Rastafarian bands—as music that was, in its own moment, divisive. Not everyone in the Caribbean community embraced it. Her father was the kind of person who sought out whatever the new scene was, who followed the sound systems and the dancehall clashes, but one of his three brothers, more Christian, "barely knows Bob Marley." The divide within a single family complicates any assumption that Caribbean-descended people share a uniform musical inheritance.

This observation shapes how I think about cultural legitimacy in the diaspora. If musical knowledge functions as a form of pedigree—and I believe it does—then that pedigree isn't passively inherited but actively constructed. Shanice and I arrived at this point together: without native-born status, you can't rely on the ambient cultural exposure that comes from simply living in Jamaica or Dominica or Trinidad. You have to go out of your way to learn the music, attend the events, cultivate the knowledge. As I put it to Shanice, "the music really helps tie in that legitimacy frame of, 'I know this, I know what's happening, I'm up to date on the culture, I'm up to date on what's happening musically, I know what's come before—the musical legacy and lineage.' So that is my way of showing pedigree." Shanice agreed, though with a qualifier—"that's true to an extent"—which I read as an acknowledgment that pedigree through musical knowledge is real but incomplete, that there are dimensions of belonging music alone cannot secure.

> **Holland:** I remember going to some of those concerts—they'll be playing songs and everyone's just singing along like they know it. And in a way, it's almost its own implicit test of legitimacy. Like, how well do you know this? If you're really involved in the culture, you will know this; if you're not, you won't. And for me, that's where I'm like—my grandparents would play things, but not necessarily all the stuff that people listen to, and that's the generational difference of Boomer versus Gen X versus me. Boomers have their things. My grandmother loves to play the Natty Dread Christmas album. Bob Marley gets played, but some of those other artists don't get played as much. So for me, if I'm going to learn this stuff, I'm going to learn it through going to events, going to places, hearing it, and taking an active interest. So there's that implicit cultural tie-in—these are the staples most people will know—but at the same time, if no one holds it against me, I'm still good. It's not everyone's experience.

Shanice agreed and added another layer to the historical framing:

> **Shanice:** "What you have to remember is a lot of this popular reggae music, when it came out contemporaneously, [it] was weed-smoking rebel music, you know what I mean?...my was smart and like did certain things, but he was [also] hanging around people who wanted to go to like whatever the new scene was."
> **Holland:** Like wherever dancehall was popping up, or whatever sound system was playing in clashes.

Shanice: Yeah, and I think that's something we also have to understand. When we're listening to music — okay, Bob Marley was popular, but at the time there was a generational divide between someone like Bob Marley and all these other Rastafarian or roots reggae bands. So that's something to think about too, because now you go to these concerts and it's considered the softer music compared to dancehall.
Holland: Oh yeah.
Shanice: —but back then it was the rebel, weed-smoking music.
Holland: Roots reggae is all about agitation and revolution. There's no popular roots reggae without acknowledging that it was really a music for protest and social commentary.
Shanice: Yeah! And even my dad has three brothers—one lives in Maryland and barely knows Bob Marley, probably because he wasn't going to concerts like that, he was more Christian. There's that divide when it comes to Caribbean music that's not just "Oh, are you connected or not?" Especially if you're Caribbean and live in America, if you're not going to the clubs, you're not going to naturally hear other music the way you might otherwise.
Holland: That's also playing into the diaspora element of different ways of claiming cultural legitimacy. Because you lack the option of native-born status, it's not inherent—you have to go out of your way to find ways to actively claim and actively connect. Music really helps us tie in that legitimacy claim: I know what's happening, I'm up to date on the culture musically, I know the musical legacy and lineage. That is my way of showing pedigree.
Shanice: Yeah, that's true. That's true to an extent.

Nowhere To Go: Dual Experiences of Participant-Spectator

Colette's reflections on cultural legitimacy centered on the dual experience of enjoying Jamaican music while simultaneously feeling like an outsider—a dynamic they described as being both participant and spectator. I asked Colette whether their reconnection with Caribbean music made them feel at home. Their response articulated a nuanced ambivalence—a sense of cultural resonance accompanied by persistent self-consciousness about their separation from the culture.

Holland: In this reconnection to the music, does that make you feel at home? Is that something that gives you that similar sentiment?
Colette: That's an interesting question. I think when I listen to Caribbean music, it reminds me of my tie to Caribbean culture, but I don't think I feel fully at home in it, because I'm aware of my separation from it. I'm almost like—I'm in it and I'm feeling it, but I'm also a spectator. It's a dual experience happening simultaneously.
Holland: You're there, but you don't feel like you can fully claim it.
Colette: I think part of it is that whole litmus test thing we talked about. That's contributed to it. And I don't know if that has just reduced my ability to enjoy it, because I feel self-conscious.
Holland: Like, am I a resident of this space?

Colette: Exactly. And sometimes I do feel like more of a guest, especially because I am making a conscious effort to listen to this music—it's not around me, it's not already part of my day. I have to go and google it in the same way a person of non-Jamaican heritage would. And so I feel at home in it when there are people like me enjoying it with me—people who have similar experiences of being that second generation, twice removed, whatever we want to call it—where I know that when we're enjoying this, we're enjoying it in a similar way.
Holland: Where there's no one questioning your feelings of belonging—you're just allowed to fully embrace it.
Colette: Exactly. I know that both of us probably weren't driving around Kingston listening to this song, but we're both enjoying it because we both know it, and we are connected to Jamaican heritage in other ways that reinforce our enjoyment of this music. We have the bigger picture, even if we're not able to paint every single brushstroke by memory because we've had those layers of separation. So in those moments, it feels like home—if I'm listening with my brother, or with my parents on a rare occasion, or with friends. I don't have any friends who are born in Jamaica, so for the most part, I know we're having a shared experience that I feel at home in. But I wouldn't say listening to this music by itself makes me feel at home, because of that sense of coming to it as a guest.

Sandy, Shanice, and Colette each describe a version of the same labor: holding a Caribbean cultural identity from a position the culture does not automatically confirm. Sandy compares herself to a cousin who grew up in Belize and registers the shortfall. Shanice cultivates musical pedigree as a way to "show up" at concerts without being caught out. Colette listens as both participant and guest, the two positions running in parallel. What links these accounts is code-switching—tuning fluency up or down to match a given room, lineage, or expectation.

That same tuning happens, at scale and under industry lights, in the work of the artists they listen to. Jamaican singjay Shenseea and British-Jamaican artist Stefflon Don are doing in public what Shanice and Colette described to me in private: negotiating authenticity from positions that are never fully inside, modulating patwa, slackness, and sonic register against audiences whose approval is never automatic. Read alongside the interviews, the mirroring

becomes visible: the cultural code-switching diasporic listeners practice as an audience is the same move artists make on stage.

Cultural Spectacle: Shenseea, Stefflon Don, & The Politics of Fitting In

Shenseea and Stefflon Don perform, from opposite sides of the Jamaican/diaspora divide, the same negotiation of belonging Shanice and Colette described in conversation. Both artists navigate three competing demands simultaneously: cultural authenticity within a genre that polices who counts as Caribbean, gendered power structures within a genre historically coded as male, and global market accessibility within an industry calibrated to Western sensibilities. Shenseea's “Be Good” (2021) and Stefflon Don's “Clockwork (feat. Spice)” (2022) are useful precisely because each song shows what it looks like to hold all three pressures at once—and because each artist answers the pressures from a different structural position.

Shenseea, an island-born artist, navigates these demands as an international dancehall performer whose Jamaican-born status isn't in question, but whose genre fidelity is. She must sustain local credibility through patwa-laden singjay vocals riding Afro-fusion and ragga riddims. At the same time, crossover success pressures her to trade patwa for synth-pop melodies and drill polyrhythms calibrated for international markets. This versatility has secured her major stardom and critical acclaim, but it has also generated authenticity tensions: her diluted patwa in recent crossover work is read, in some quarters, as a disavowal of Caribbean heritage in exchange for social mobility.

Stefflon Don is the diasporic artist doing the reverse labor. From London, she intensifies patwa density and slackness vocabulary precisely because her Caribbean position is the one she

has to claim rather than inhabit. Her hard-hitting flows over dancehall and trap-influenced beats register a diasporic sonic culture that asserts dancehall belonging while acknowledging a geography outside Jamaica's borders. Where Shenseea risks being read as too-crossover-to-be-Caribbean, Stefflon Don risks being read as too-diasporic-to-be-legitimate—and the intensification of her patwa and slackness performance is the answer to that risk.

Read together, "Be Good" and "Clockwork" are two different strategies for converting legitimacy pressure into creative agency. Each artist employs cultural code-switching and defiant sexual spectacle to navigate male-dominated transnational pathways; each makes a subversive intervention into an inequitable global music industry. But the shape of the code-switching isn't the same, and the asymmetry is the point. The difference between Shenseea diluting patwa outward and Stefflon Don intensifying it inward is the difference between island-born and diaspora-born positions within the same transnational scene—the same structural asymmetry Sandy was tracing, on the audience side, when she contrasted her listening practice with her Belize-raised cousin's

Sonic Embodiments

Shenseea and Stefflon Don embody varying sociocultural positions within dancehall's transnational landscape. Shenseea represents conventional Jamaican dancehall origins, while Stefflon Don exemplifies the genre's growing transnationality, illustrating how diasporas both construct and collapse cultural boundaries while embodying pluralism. Their contrasting musical styles reflect individual backgrounds intersecting with broader dancehall currents. Through Mann's embodied cognition lens, dancehall's driving polyrhythms, heavy bass, and patwa-laden

vocals create embodied experiences that shape listener engagement with cultural identity. These sonic choices function as vehicles for cultural memory and identity formation through physical engagement rather than mere aesthetic preferences.

Shenseea epitomizes the classic dancehall artist through patwa-laden singjay vocals embellished with American R&B/pop timbral elements. Her dancehall repertoire pairs patwa vocals with Afro-fusion and ragga riddims, establishing credibility within the genre. Her American crossover repertoire features synth-pop melodies overlaid with drill polyrhythms, creating lighter, pop-centric sounds designed for international markets. This versatility—melodic dancehall and R&B singing with occasional rapping—has brought major stardom and critical acclaim while generating authenticity tensions.

"Be Good" demonstrates this ragga-centric approach through muted synth pads and distorted vocals that create a sensual ambiance calibrated to carry patwa-laden delivery without smoothing its edges for pop legibility. The chorus blends patwa and standard English; "Mi waan be good" establishes the tone while the figurative language that follows asserts female desire in terms the genre recognizes as fluent rather than translated. Throughout the song, Shenseea deploys slackness culture as a tool for asserting female autonomy—automotive metaphors, explicit sexual preference, the grammar of female demand rather than female availability. This is the move that makes "Be Good" legible as dancehall rather than pop-with-dancehall-inflection: slackness is working here as genre-credentialing labor at the same time that it is working as a gendered claim to agency.

In contrast, Stefflon Don represents dancehall's growing diasporic sonic culture through different legitimacy strategies. Her hard-hitting rap flows over dancehall and trap-influenced

beats reflect a diverse cultural background and American hip hop collaborations. This fusion creates a distinct sound claiming dancehall authenticity while acknowledging position outside Jamaica's geographical boundaries.

"Clockwork" features Stefflon Don and Spice delivering a high-energy, sexually charged performance showcasing deviance as agency. The chorus' repetitive structure around the phrase, "clock, work," establishes female sexual prowess and endurance through hypnotic repetition, functioning as an insistent declaration of sexual power. Both artists employ dense patwa slang and provocative imagery, with Spice's verse particularly notable for linguistic density and spatial references to sexual positions.

Both songs feature rapid-fire, staccato flows emphasizing driving rhythm and high-energy delivery. Lyrics packed with explicit sexual references, like "Love it when yuh use your tongue but, a nuh eating time" ("Be Good") and "Throat fuck up when mi cum mi nuh conscious" ("Clockwork"), use patwa to create vivid imagery, expressing an unapologetic embrace of female sexual agency. Construction metaphors linking sexual performance to physical labor recur throughout both songs. This imagery plays on the female body as commodity or project, a notion simultaneously embraced and subverted through assertive delivery. Spice's dense, rapid-fire patwa particularly challenges traditional gender roles through unabashed ownership of desires.

If Shanice described the concert sing-along as an implicit test of cultural fluency—the DJ drops the track and the room either knows it or it doesn't—Shenseea is calibrating her patwa for a structurally identical test from the other side of the stage. "Be Good" is audible as a studied negotiation of exactly the legibility Shanice was describing: patwa dense enough to pass the sing-along test that Caribbean audiences administer, loose enough to remain intelligible to the

pop crossover audiences the song is also courting. The litmus test Shanice identified as a property of the crowd turns out to be a property of the artist's process as well.

Market Navigation Strategies

Applying Meehan's framework, global music industry spaces function as decolonizing contact zones where power dynamics undergo constant negotiation.[263] Both artists employ strategic cultural code-switching to navigate spaces that privilege male-dominated narratives and Western musical sensibilities. "Be Good"'s lilting melodies and sensual rhythms evoke romantic intimacy, while "Clockwork"'s relentless rhythm and aggressive vocals encourage visceral responses mirroring sexual liberation themes. The songs' rootedness in dancehall's slackness tradition serves dual purposes: asserting cultural identity while navigating global market demands.

Mann's embodied cognition frames this sexuality as lived physical experience rather than cerebral concept.[264] Within dancehall's slackness tradition, sexual agency takes precedence over respectability, and within masculinist realms, overt female sexuality functions as a counter-hegemonic tool rather than a concession to the male gaze. For marginalized performers—women, diasporic artists, queer performers—defiant sexual performativity is convertible currency: it attracts notoriety that can be traded for greater creative control. But the strategy carries its own risk. Tethering legitimacy to essentialized, hypersexual images risks creative

[263] Meehan 2009.

[264] Mann 2015.

pigeonholing and exploitation at the same time that it opens space for agency. Both Shenseea and Stefflon Don are working inside that double bind rather than escaping it.

Operating within the extended Jamaican diaspora, these artists create music reflecting dancehall's global circulation.[265] "Clockwork"'s UK grime influence reveals how Stefflon Don's British-Jamaican context shapes her sound, underscoring cultural exchange's multi-directional nature within the Caribbean diaspora. Despite shared code-switching strategies, each artist faces distinct challenges reflecting different diasporic positions. Shenseea's pop-oriented sound and increasing standard English usage spark "selling out" criticisms, highlighting tensions between global accessibility and cultural authenticity. Meanwhile, Stefflon Don must constantly assert authenticity as a diasporic artist within a scene privileging island-born performers, demonstrating how geographical origin remains a contested legitimacy site. Similarly, Colette's description of listening as "both participant and spectator" is, at the level of artistic production, Stefflon Don's predicament. Stefflon Don performs for a scene that privileges island-born artists the way Colette listens in a space that privileges lifelong immersion; both are making active bids for cultural recognition from positions that don't grant it automatically. The difference is scale and visibility: Colette negotiates this in a living room or at a concert; Stefflon Don negotiates it across streaming platforms and press cycles. The structure of the negotiation—proving fluency you were not born into—is the same.

[265] Hulme 1986.

Homeward Bound: Diasporic Fabrications of Legitimacy

This section opened with a question the participants kept reaching for from different angles: what gives you the right to claim Caribbean identity when you have never lived there? Shanice, Colette, and Sandy answered in different registers—pedigree through musical knowledge, dual-experience listening, the ache of insufficient proximity—but each answer turned on the same operation. Legitimacy in the diaspora is made, not inherited. It is cultivated through attentive listening, practiced in communal spaces, and performed for audiences (family, peers, strangers at concerts) whose approval is never automatic.

Shenseea and Stefflon Don make a structurally parallel operation audible on the production side, though from opposite positions within it. Shenseea calibrates patwa density and sonic register against the competing demands of local audiences who police genre authenticity and international audiences who require pop legibility; Stefflon Don intensifies patwa and slackness vocabulary from London against a scene that privileges island-born performers. The code-switching Shanice and Colette described as listeners isn't identical to the code-switching Shenseea and Stefflon Don are producing as performers—the asymmetries of position are real—but the underlying operation is the same: Caribbean legitimacy, on either side of the stage, is a claim made under negotiation rather than a status conferred at birth. The contact zone runs in both directions: the stage calibrates for the crowd, and the crowd calibrates for the stage.

Reading the artists alongside the interviews exposes what a pedigree-through-knowledge model on its own can miss. Shanice's pedigree frames musical knowledge as something the diasporic listener acquires to pass as culturally competent. The Shenseea-Stefflon Don pairing shows that competence itself is a contested, constructed, constantly

renegotiated claim—even for the artists making the music Shanice is learning. There is no stable interior of Caribbean authenticity that either the listener or the artist arrives at by working hard enough. What there is, instead, is a set of strategies—linguistic, sonic, embodied, social—for claiming Caribbean identity in contact zones where that claim is always under negotiation. The "Too ___ to fit" frame that opens this chapter's clashes section isn't a diasporic problem. It is a Caribbean condition, made visible most sharply in the diaspora because the diaspora cannot rely on ambient cultural exposure to paper it over.

This is the condition the Pluralized Identity model is built to hold, rather than to resolve. The model does not rescue Shanice, Colette, Sandy, Shenseea, and Stefflon Don from incompleteness by declaring them whole. It shifts the axis: the question is no longer whether any of them has enough of the right knowledge, proximity, or accent to count, but how each of them assembles a Caribbean identity from positions that were never singular to begin with. Plurality isn't the answer to the legitimacy question. It is the frame that makes the legitimacy question visible as the wrong question.

Marginality: At the Crossroads of Queerness & Homophobia in the West Indies

The question of what it costs to hold a queer or trans identity alongside a Caribbean one recurs across the interviews that follow. Caribbean homophobia isn't a freestanding cultural feature but the sedimented product of specific, overlapping histories: British buggery statutes exported through colonial legal infrastructure and retained on the books of nine of twelve Anglo-

Caribbean states long after independence,[266] and Christian (particularly evangelical and Pentecostal) and Rastafari theological traditions that moralized those statutes into spiritual conviction, further amplified within dancehall's "murder music" moment.[267] These aren't abstract backdrops. They form the sociocultural environment in which Jennifer, Shanice, and Colette work out what it means to be queer or trans and Caribbean at once — and the strategies they describe aren't aberrations from an imagined whole Caribbean self but active, adult responses to a condition in which full presence has not been available to them. The "Too ___ to fit" frame operates here at its sharpest edge: too queer to read fully Caribbean, too Caribbean to read fully queer, too specific in intersection to fit anywhere without modulation. What their accounts make visible is the labor of holding identities that the dominant terms of Caribbean cultural legibility were not designed to accommodate — and the creative, costly, and often grief-laden forms that labor takes.

No Batty Bwoys: The West Indies, Religion, & the Sanctification of Homophobia

If colonial law provided the structural scaffolding for Caribbean homophobia, religion supplied its moral architecture. The Caribbean's religious landscape—a complex tapestry of Christianity, Rastafari, and African-derived spiritual traditions—has been instrumental in sanctifying anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, transforming what began as an externally imposed legal prohibition into what many Caribbean people experience as a deeply held spiritual conviction.[268] This process

[266] Human Rights Watch 2018, 2023.

[267] Hope 2010, 73–96; Werman 2018; Grove 2019.

[268] Nixon 2015, 10.

has been neither monolithic nor uniform; different religious traditions have contributed to the marginalization of queer Caribbean people through distinct theological logics and with varying degrees of intensity. The cumulative effect, however, has been the production of a sociocultural environment in which homosexuality is widely understood as fundamentally incompatible with Caribbean moral, spiritual, and national identity.[269]

Christianity, particularly in its evangelical and Pentecostal expressions, exerts enormous influence on Caribbean sexual politics. Jamaica, which has more churches per capita than virtually anywhere else on earth, exemplifies this dynamic.[270] Scholars have identified conservative Christianity as one of the most potent subcultural forces promoting homophobia across the region, alongside Rastafari theology and dancehall narrative culture.[271] Pentecostal denominations in Jamaica maintain doctrinal statements condemning homosexuality, constructing rigid binaries between the "holy" and the "worldly" that position queerness as irreconcilable with spiritual righteousness.[272] The expansion of American televangelism into the Caribbean beginning in the 1970s accelerated this trend considerably, as the hysterical opposition to homosexuality broadcast by American televangelists was rapidly replicated by local Christian leaders whose homophobic rhetoric found fertile ground in societies already shaped by colonial-era buggery laws.[273]

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[269] Hope 2006, 47–48.

[270] Butler 2019, 27–28.

[271] Erskine 2017, 110–112.

[272] Schmidt 2008, 45–48; Butler 2019, 30.

[273] Noel Erskine documents that American televangelists became a significant presence on Jamaican television when broadcasting expanded in the 1970s, and their vocal opposition to homosexuality was rapidly replicated by local Christian broadcasters and church leaders (Erskine 2017, 114).

Rastafari's relationship to homosexuality, while theologically distinct from Christian fundamentalism, has been equally consequential for Caribbean sexual politics, particularly given the movement's deep entanglement with reggae and dancehall music. Rastafarians draw heavily upon select passages from the Hebrew Scriptures—particularly Leviticus 18:22 and the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah—to theologically justify their opposition to homosexuality, regarding same-sex relations as "unnatural" and an abomination before Jah.[274][275] The hard-line Bobo Shanti order, which has been particularly influential among reggae and dancehall artists such as Sizzla and Capleton, espouses an especially strident anti-gay theology. The phrase "fire fi battyman"—invoking biblical fire to "burn" homosexuals—became a rhetorical staple within Rastafari-inflected dancehall, circulating widely through popular music and embedding itself in the vernacular of everyday Jamaican discourse.[276]

The convergence of religious conviction, postcolonial masculinity, and popular cultural expression found its most incendiary articulation in the phenomenon that international LGBTQ+ activists termed "murder music": dancehall tracks whose lyrics explicitly advocated violence against gay men and lesbians.[277] While Carolyn Cooper has argued that dancehall's "slackness" represents a radical, underground confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and duplicitous morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society, the genre's anti-gay content operated through a different logic entirely—one that reinforced rather than subverted existing hierarchies

[274] Partridge 2017, 325–326.
[275] Ibid., 327.
[276] Hope 2006, 52–53.
[277] Skelbo 2015, 105–106.

of sexual normativity.[278] Donna Hope's analysis of masculinity in dancehall identifies a "Chi Chi Man" typology defined by anti-male homosexuality and homophobia, functioning as a boundary-policing mechanism through which heteronormative masculinity is publicly performed, affirmed, and enforced.[279]

The most notorious example of murder music is Buju Banton's "Boom Bye Bye" (1992), which depicted the killing of gay men through shooting, acid attacks, and immolation.[280] Banton was not alone in producing such material. Beenie Man's "Batty Man Fi Dead" and "Han Up Deh" attracted international condemnation, as did the lyrical output of Sizzla and Capleton, who urged audiences to "kill dem" and declared that "battybwoys haffi dead." These were not abstract rhetorical exercises. In 2006, Time magazine labeled Jamaica "the most homophobic place on earth," documenting a pattern of extreme violence against LGBTQ+ Jamaicans, including the murders of prominent gay activists Brian Williamson and Lenford "Steve" Harvey, mob attacks, and police complicity in anti-gay violence.[281]

The international backlash against murder music produced the Stop Murder Music campaign (2004–2007), a coordinated effort by OutRage!, the Black Gay Men's Advisory Group, and Jamaica's J-FLAG to pressure venues into cancelling concerts by artists whose lyrics incited

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[278] Carolyn Cooper argues that "slackness" within dancehall cannot be reduced to graphic sexual behavior but rather represents a radical confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and duplicitous morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society (Cooper 2004, 147).

[279] Hope, Inna di Dancehall, 54–55.

[280] The song contains lyrics depicting the murder of gay men through shooting, acid attacks, and immolation (Skelbo 2015, 108–109).

[281] Tim Padgett reported on the murders of two prominent Jamaican gay activists: Brian Williamson and Lenford "Steve" Harvey, who was shot to death on the eve of World AIDS Day after gunmen discovered a photograph of him with his partner (Padgett 2006).

anti-gay violence.[282] The campaign resulted in estimated losses exceeding £2.5 million to artists and promoters and culminated in the Reggae Compassionate Act of 2007, in which major dancehall artists—including Beenie Man, Sizzla, and Capleton—pledged to cease performing songs inciting hatred or violence against any community.[283] As Johannes Frandsen Skelbo's analysis of the 2009 Sizzla concert controversy in Copenhagen demonstrates, however, the tensions between dancehall's cultural production and Western regulatory frameworks did not dissolve with the signing of a compassionate act. Skelbo reads the Copenhagen case as emblematic of the postcolonial contradictions that emerge when formerly colonized cultural producers encounter the legal and moral architectures of Western nations, raising difficult questions about the authority to regulate expression and the grounds on which such regulation may be justified.[284]

"Blaze di fire mek we bun dem!": Compartmentalization, Lost Cultural Knowledge, & Grief

When I asked Jennifer about navigating her trans identity alongside Caribbean cultural norms, she described how homophobia within the culture—particularly from her father—had necessitated a period of divestment in favor of more affirming Black American spaces. Her transition, however, enabled a gradual reconnection, tracing what she called "coming full circle"—from distancing herself from Caribbean culture to reclaiming it on her own terms.

Holland: Being a trans woman, and then the rampant and pervasive ethos of homophobia

[282] Skelbo 2015, 110–111.

[283] Skelbo 2015, 112.

[284] Sizzla's 2009 Copenhagen performance, permitted on condition that he refrain from homophobic material, registers the postcolonial tensions that surface when formerly colonized cultural producers encounter Western regulatory frameworks (Skelbo 2015, 113–114).

in the Caribbean—I'm sure that creates its own set of challenges to navigate.
Jennifer: Two million percent. And I think that's probably what made me divest a little bit from Caribbean culture, because I felt so alienated. So much of my politics had been informed by Western ideologies, and sure, there was unlearning to do there, but a lot less than—and I can only imagine if I grew up strictly religious. My mother was like "Church, God," but we didn't go to church frequently. So I think that was really hard—my father before he died, that was a Jamaican man. That man was homophobic. That man was transphobic, he was all the things. And so I think that really felt like a necessity to divest from that and invest in the divas and the Black American culture that felt free and radical.
Holland: Which made you feel seen and embraced.
Jennifer: Yes! And once I started to transition, I was able to come more full circle with a lot of my family and not divest as much, and similarly with the music. But I still mostly listen to women.
Holland: Has transitioning made it easier to reconnect with elements of your Jamaican identity?
Jennifer: I see them in different ways, certainly. It's made it easier for me to connect. I've really gotten into cooking more Jamaican food for myself again, and the food and the music go hand in hand. So it has made me want to connect with it more and made it easier. The gender roles—I'm still a little like, I don't know that I'll ever fix my man's plate. Maybe I will! But not with the frequency that traditional Jamaican culture would like me to. So there's still some friction, but yes, it's made it a lot easier, especially as I've been out to my whole family. It's facilitated ease, and it's made me able to look back on these memories fondly. I really haven't thought of music as the connection to these memories before, so I haven't thought about them in a long time.
Holland: As they're more accepting—like, we're not changing back, this is the path—it's get on or get off.
Jennifer: Very much get on or get off! That's something I was able to gain from my individualistic pathway that had already been tried. I was able to be like, get on or get off. Whereas I think a lot of my friends who grew up in almost exclusively Caribbean households, even though they grew up in America—that divestment would be very hard.
Holland: Because you grew up in that collectivist mentality, the idea of separating yourself from the unit—you're like, "Wait, what's happening? I don't know if I can fully do that." You have to make concessions.
Jennifer: Yes! And it's a double-edged sword. I'm thankful for the ability to do that because it's allowed me to love myself a lot more. And then it's something I mourn a little because community is so important. Now where I live in LA, nobody—neighbors aren't bringing you anything. It's fully the other way. And I have friends who are like, "Oh, this would really disappoint my family," and that's a reason for them not to do something they love or come out. It's a double-edged sword. It's given me freedom, but I mourn some of it, certainly.

Shanice discussed the ongoing process of reconciling her cultural and queer identities, including how homophobia within her family—particularly from her aunt—created barriers to cultural knowledge transmission. She described how a close family member's homophobia, which became apparent after Shanice came out, had severed a key pathway for cultural transmission—

particularly around Jamaican cooking.

> **Shanice:** I was very close to my aunt when I was little, and [when] then as I got older and came out, I realized she was homophobic. When I was six, I didn't necessarily know I was gay, so how would I know? [My aunt and uncle] got married when I was younger. Maybe my uncle thought to ask, but most Black women were religious in some way—like my mom, who was religious but wasn't homophobic or transphobic.
> **Holland:** That pervasive layer of homophobia that's still entrenched in—
> **Shanice:** Yeah, for sure.
> **Holland:** It feels like you want to fully embrace it but you have to keep it at a distance for self-preservation purposes.
> **Shanice:** Yeah, exactly. And because of that, certain stuff when it comes to Jamaican food—my grandmother doesn't really cook anymore, she's ninety now. By the time I had an awareness, she had stopped cooking, and I was in boarding school, not present to take it in. So certain things I'll have to learn on my own or through different aunts slowly. And stuff my stepmom knows how to make, like sorrel—she taught me, but you need to continue practicing. And while she would teach me, she's—my dad doesn't play certain stuff, so she's not going to do anything outwardly. But in my grown age, I don't necessarily feel comfortable—I don't want to be around you anyway. But I have to, I guess.
> **Holland:** The tension is simply there because of the homophobia.
> **Shanice:** Yeah! But I'm not going to be like, "Teach me," because I don't want to be around you right now. So certain stuff I'm going to have to pick up on my own or learn slowly through overhearing or seeing, and that will take longer.

Colette provided a detailed account of how they compartmentalized their queer and Jamaican identities to maintain familial relationships, describing the emotional cost of suppressing one aspect of selfhood to preserve connection to another. When asked whether their other identities shaped their relationship to their cultural identity, she described a painful but deliberate separation between their queerness and their Jamaicanness, driven by the knowledge that many family members would not accept both.

> **Colette:** I think for me—I know that I haven't done the work to merge the two. My Jamaicanness and my queerness I don't see as overlapping in the experiences I've been able to have outside of college. When it comes to family members I grew up with, I feel very connected to my Jamaicanness. But family members I haven't come out to yet—I know there's a reason I'm hiding certain aspects of my identity from them. That creates a natural demarcation internally, where in many moments where I'm excited to reconnect with the Jamaican relationship we have, I'm suppressing this other side of myself.

Colette then described a specific incident that crystallized this tension—a phone call with a family friend that unexpectedly turned transphobic.

> **Colette:** It's actually frustrating, because I was on the phone with someone the other day and we were laughing, and this is a family friend, and then somehow the conversation shifted and became transphobic. And I was like, oh, right—let me remember that there are certain things I can only talk about with certain people, and some battles aren't worth fighting. Sometimes I feel guilty for not reconnecting with certain people, or not initiating conversations with family members I don't talk to frequently, and then I remember there's so much effort that goes into being the right type of person when I'm talking to them. Sometimes I shouldn't have to put in that effort, and maybe that's why I avoid those conversations—because I don't want to have to suppress myself.
> **Holland:** Or have someone invalidate your experience or identity.
> **Colette:** Yeah, exactly. Or pretend that I agree with them just because I don't want to out myself as someone who they don't deem worthy of love or safety or protection or even a familial relationship. A lot of that could be at risk, and so I end up compartmentalizing because it's the safe thing to do without feeling like I need to lose people—and losing a lot of those people would be losing my connection to my culture. I know people who came to the US and have not been back since because of their sexuality, because it's not safe to go back to Jamaica. Or who have lost decades-long friendships because of their sexuality. So I'm very aware of the ways I need to compartmentalize. Otherwise, it's heartbreaking to understand the ways those aspects of myself cannot fully overlap, at least at this point in time.
> **Holland:** Something I constantly battle with is not wanting to lose my connections to my culture and community, but at the same time, I can't fully show up as myself in spaces that mean a lot to me. It's this constant battle of negotiation and attrition, and at some point there has to be some level of acceptance. Compartmentalization makes complete sense—how can you show up in a space that doesn't fully want you or accept you, while it also hurts when the people you care about most aren't going to be the most accepting of you?
> **Colette:** Yeah, exactly. And if I don't think about it, it's not that bad. And that's one of the other reasons why feeling at home isn't the easiest thing—there are so many different factors, and so few places where all of those elements can come into play and I still feel safe and loved and protected. Those places are with my parents, with friends. But it's a very limited number of spaces. If it was to expand, it would have to be through online spaces where you can heavily curate and seek out the types of people you're trying to connect with and set certain boundaries. But it's not that simple in offline relationships.
> **Holland:** The boundaries aren't always necessarily there?
> **Colette:** Yeah, especially with long-standing relationships or ones you grew up with. It's like, "Okay, I can't lose this very important thing, so I'll just shut off this side of myself and turn on that side."

Colonial Legacies & the Criminalization of Sexualities

To understand the sociopolitical climate surrounding LGBTQ+ people in the contemporary Caribbean, one must interrogate with the region's colonial inheritance. The anti-sodomy and buggery statutes that persist across much of the Anglophone Caribbean aren't indigenous legal traditions but legislative artifacts of British imperial governance.[285] As Lyndon Gill observes in Erotic Islands, the Caribbean's entanglement with European colonialism produced a regulatory apparatus that fundamentally restructured how sexuality was understood, policed, and punished across the region, displacing preexisting systems of sexual meaning with a Eurocentric moral framework rooted in Christian doctrine and Victorian propriety.[286] The Buggery Act of 1533, the first English statute criminalizing sexual activity between men, was exported to British colonies worldwide as part of the empire's legal infrastructure; its language—penalizing "the abominable crime of buggery"—was transplanted nearly verbatim into the penal codes of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Guyana, and other territories throughout the West Indies.[287]

The endurance of these laws is striking. While only approximately twenty-five percent of non-Commonwealth countries criminalize same-sex activity, nearly eighty percent of former British colonies retain anti-buggery and anti-sodomy legislation. In the Caribbean specifically, nine of twelve Anglo-Caribbean states continue to criminalize consensual same-sex intercourse

[285] Human Rights Watch 2008, 5.

[286] Gill 2018, 3–4.

[287] Enacted as part of Henry VIII's campaign to curtail ecclesiastical jurisdiction and expand royal authority, the Buggery Act of 1533 made buggery a capital offense triable in secular courts and was subsequently exported to British colonies worldwide (Human Rights Watch 2008, 7).

using colonial-era terminology.[288] Jamaica's Offences Against the Person Act makes buggery punishable by up to ten years' imprisonment with hard labor; Guyana's statute carries a penalty of life imprisonment; and until recently, Barbados sanctioned buggery with sentences of up to life in prison. These laws did not remain on the books as dormant relics. They actively shaped the sociocultural terrain on which Caribbean attitudes toward homosexuality were constructed and reinforced, such that what European colonialism imposed as an instrument of moral regulation became, over centuries, so deeply embedded in Caribbean legal and cultural consciousness that many West Indians came to regard homophobia not as a colonial imposition but as an authentic expression of Caribbean values.

The colonial disruption of indigenous Caribbean sexual cultures was equally consequential. Before the imposition of European legal and moral frameworks, the Caribbean hosted established traditions of same-sex intimacy integrated into community and family structures. Among Afro-Surinamese communities, the practice of mati work—rooted in West African traditions and the Winti religion—described women who maintained sexual and emotional relationships with both women and men, raising children collectively in arrangements that privileged female kinship bonds over heteronormative nuclear family structures.[289] Similarly, the Caribbean terms zami and kambrada—used across Anglophone and Dutch Caribbean territories—referenced both non-sexual companionship and same-sex erotic relationships, reflecting a fluidity of sexual expression that colonial administrators sought to eradicate.[290]

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[288] Human Rights Watch 2018, 1–2.

[289] Wekker 2006, 170–172; Gill 2018, 12–14.

[290] Gill 2018, 14–15.

Under European colonialism, buggery and gross indecency laws were deployed not merely to punish specific sexual acts but to reinforce sex and gender norms centered on heterosexual relationships and the nuclear family, demonizing traditions like mati work, sibi, and zami alongside Caribbean matrilineal family structures as "deviant from the European norm."[291]

(Don't) Make Waves: Calypso Rose, Koffee, & The Politics of Fame

The strategies Jennifer, Shanice, and Colette describe are rehearsed across the Caribbean and its diasporas by artists whose public lives make the negotiation structurally different — not in kind, but in scale. What the ethnographic subsections document at the scale of kitchens, family-friend phone calls, and boarding-school absences, the music industry rehearses at the scale of genre gatekeeping, album cycles, management teams, and the audibility that attaches to a Grammy win or a Coachella set. The sedimented field conditions producing Caribbean homophobia and transphobia are the same in both cases, and worth naming before turning to the artists working inside them.

British buggery statutes were exported across the Anglo-Caribbean through nineteenth-century colonial legal infrastructure, retained on the books of most Anglophone Caribbean states long after independence, and read through Christian and, in Jamaica, Rastafari theological traditions that moralized them into spiritual conviction.[292][293] These were imposed on, not

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[291] King 2014.

[292] Constitutional challenges between 2016 and 2025 have rapidly shifted these statutes' status: courts struck them down in Belize (2016), Trinidad and Tobago (2018, overturned on appeal in March 2025 under a constitutional savings clause), Antigua and Barbuda and Saint Kitts and Nevis (2022), Barbados (December 2022), Dominica (2024), and Saint Lucia (2025) (Human Rights Watch 2018, 2023).

[293] Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago retain buggery or gross indecency provisions (Gill 2018, 137–44).

continuous with, pre-colonial and early-colonial Caribbean sexual cultures whose vocabularies for same-sex intimacy—*mati* in Suriname, *zami* in the Eastern Caribbean, kambrada in Curaçao—describe practices the colonial legal and religious architecture did not discover but overwrote.[294]

By the late twentieth century this assemblage crystallized in dancehall's "murder music" moment: a cluster of lyrics calling for violence against gay men — Buju Banton's "Boom Bye Bye" (1992) the most enduring emblem—which the Stop Murder Music campaign and subsequent Reggae Compassionate Act contested but did not extinguish.[295] The field these artists work in isn't a generalized "Caribbean homophobia;" it's a specific sedimentation of statute, sanctified morality, and genre convention whose audibility has ranged from the criminal code to the dance floor. Teresa surfaces the texture of what it feels like to encounter that sedimentation as a queer Caribbean listener.

> **Teresa:** Because it was like the homesickness of like, you just need that familiar sound in order to get you through this study session that you're about to have. I remember a lot of Buju Banton. What's that very controversial song- "Boom, bye, bye inna batty bwoy head."
> **Holland:** Oh ok, yeah.
> **Teresa:** That one that we weren't supposed to listen to, and that was actually really upsetting, and we should not listen to it anymore. I remember being like, "Yeah, this is it." And if you have a Jamaican friend explain to you what a batty bwoy is, and you're like, "Oh, um, I'm sorry."

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[294] On mati work as an Afro-Surinamese sexual culture predating and exceeding Euro-American identity categories, see Wekker (2006); on zami, kambrada, and the "Caribglobal" insistence that transgressive sexualities and native understandings of same-sex desire run throughout Caribbean history (King 2014, 1–19 and 72–101). See also Tinsley (2010) on eroticism between women in the Caribbean imagination, and Glave (2008) on the archive of Caribbean queer writing these native vocabularies subtend.

[295] On "Boom Bye Bye" and the dancehall "Chi Chi Man" archetype, see Hope 2010, 73–96; on Banton's March 2019 removal of the song from streaming and his catalogue, Grove 2019; on Caribbean diasporic queer reception and the song's afterlives, Werman 2018's interview with Staceyann Chin. The 2004 Stop Murder Music campaign (OutRage!, J-FLAG, Black Gay Men's Advisory Group) produced the 2007 Reggae Compassionate Act, signed by Banton, Beenie Man, Sizzla, and Capleton among others—several later disavowing it.

What Teresa's account discloses is a fourth shape the field takes in participants' lives, distinct from Jennifer's divestment, Shanice's severed transmission, and Colette's compartmentalization. Away at college, using Caribbean music to hold herself together through study sessions, she reaches for Buju Banton because the sound of him is the sound of home — and what reaches her alongside the sound is the lyric. The “Jamaican friend explain[ing]” what a “batty bwoy” is marks the moment at which the song's patois, which had functioned as warm familiarity, becomes a register she cannot pretend not to hear. Her retrospective formulation is precise: "we weren't supposed to listen to it, and that was actually really upsetting, and we should not listen to it anymore."

The injury is named, the prescription issued, the song nevertheless remembered — the break registered without being resolved. Teresa's passage shows the production and reception sides of the field meeting inside a single college dorm room, where homesickness and homophobia arrive in the same bassline. The strategies Jennifer, Shanice, and Colette describe at the relational scale are responses to precisely this kind of encounter iterated across a lifetime. The artists whose careers have been built under these same field conditions have had to develop their own strategies for holding public presence without being broken by the reception norms the field enforces.

Linda McCartha Monica Sandy-Lewis — known globally as Calypso Rose, the Tobagonian grande dame whose career redefined what a woman in calypso could be — offers one of the most sustained examples across the long twentieth century. Her sexuality has been at once openly lived and strategically unnamed: partnered with a woman for more than two decades, she consecrated that partnership in a California Catholic church and told the

anthropologist Lyndon Gill that her “whole family knew” and her aunt, the woman who raised her, "accepted" her.[296] Yet when Gill asked directly whether she would describe herself as a lesbian, she smiled and answered, “I am happy”— declining the English-language category and offering instead what Gill reads as a Trinbagonian vocabulary of productive silence, a “language of ellipses” by which “to mention the unmentionable outside of language.”[297] Her 1966 marriage to Aubrey Lewis, read in earlier accounts as evidence of a heterosexual life, is restored by Gill—following Adrienne Rich—to its actual function as a strategic maneuver through which an economically precarious Caribbean performer protected her ability to keep working.[298]

A Spiritual Baptist mourned five times and elevated to the rank of Mother, she’s held her devotion and her sexuality alongside one another for decades without subordinating either. Unsurprisingly, her management has threatened legal action over any coverage framing her as a gay icon in an attempt to preserve her public image[299] to preserve a public image that Rose herself has repeatedly undercut. In a 2012 video, widely circulated on Youtube within Caribbean LGBTQ networks, Rose looks into a camera and not only declares she’s gay but also discloses she’s been married to a woman for seventeen years and is neither afraid nor ashamed to admit it.[300] Clearly, the reception apparatus around her has not caught up to what she has, in multiple registers, already said.

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[296] Rose’s interview with Gill took place in 2007 (Gill 2018, 115–16).

[297] Gill 2018, 115–16.

[298] Gill draws on Rich ([1980] 1986, 23–75) to restore the strategic dimension of Rose's 1966 marriage (Gill 2018, 113–15).

[299] Surtees 2019.

[300] The “Chutney Pride Exclusive Calypso Rose Coming Out Interview” video was subsequently shared by the University of the West Indies Institute for Gender and Development Studies and other Caribbean LGBTQ organizations.

What this archive documents is compartmentalization conducted at the scale of a public career rather than a family kitchen, and it maps onto Colette's strategy with uncanny precision. Colette describes "a natural demarcation internally, where in many moments where I'm excited to reconnect with the Jamaican relationship we have, I'm suppressing this other side of myself," and names the cost directly: "losing a lot of those people would be losing my connection to my culture." Rose's version of the same calculation has been conducted across stages, record labels, press junkets, and a Coachella booking rather than Thanksgiving phone calls, but its structure is the same — the assessment that full legibility and full cultural belonging aren't currently available in the same room, and the decision to hold the plural self across different rooms rather than force a convergence the field cannot yet accept. What Gill's chapter makes possible, and what a purely biographical account would miss, is the recognition that Rose has also been pluralizing herself through her artistic output, with song doing work that interview and press release cannot.

His close reading of her calypso, “Palet” (1968)—in which she imagines herself as Rosie-the-palet-vendor, a female ice-lolly seller singing her phallic wares to female customers in the French Creole vocative "mama"—argues that the song encodes female same-sex desire through what he terms a Caribbean lesbian phallus, the melting palet both invoking and critiquing the penis while opening sonic space for a female same-sex encounter conducted “over the sticky, melting sweetness of a phallic symbol.”[301] Released in 1968, its desire has been audible to those with ears to hear it for almost six decades.

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[301]Gill 2018, 107–16. The “sticky, melting sweetness” phrase is Gill’s at 111. The close reading of “Palet” proceeds through Gill’s extension of Judith Butler’s “lesbian phallus” formulation in Butler 1993, 57–91 into what he terms a

Rose's strategy, read across the full arc of her career, has been to pluralize through the song what she has declined to declare in the interview — a production-side instance of exactly the kind of room-by-room self-holding the Pluralized Identity model names. That this operation has been read by a significant part of her reception apparatus as unnaming, or as rumor to be managed, rather than as multivocal self-presentation, is a measure of the field she has had to work inside, not of her strategy's inadequacy.

Similarly, Mikayla Simpson—performing as Koffee until her 2025 re-introduction as Original Koffee—offers the contemporary case in which Rose's mechanisms no longer function the same way, not because the field has softened but because the apparatus disciplining queer public visibility has migrated to platforms Rose's generation never had to contend with. Koffee has never publicly addressed her sexuality. Speculation has circulated continuously, intensifying at specific flashpoints: a beach photograph with a female fan, her preferred silhouette and workout attire, and most sharply her appearance in Sam Smith's "Gimme" (2023) music video, set in an underground gay club. *DancehallMag*'s coverage documented both homophobic backlash from Jamaican commentators and what one commenter called collective pretense—Jamaicans "acting as if they were clueless about Koffee" performing an oblivion already abandoned.[302]

What managed silence looked like for Rose's generation — phone calls to editors, press releases eliding certain coverage, carefully staged interviews — no longer describes Koffee's

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Caribbean-specific phallic symbology centered on the palet as melting, transferable, and explicitly female-to-female sexual object.

[302]Baugh 2023 on the "Gimme" video reception; Allan 2022 on the beach photograph and earlier speculation cycles.

conditions. The discourse happens on social media, and silence functions not as withdrawal but as a communicative register in its own right, read as refusal by queer audiences and confirmation-by-evasion by homophobic ones.

Koffee's public strategy, read structurally, is lateral divestment in the specific sense Jennifer's account developed: not a renunciation of the Caribbean cultural form she works in, but a purposeful expansion of the rooms in which her career operates, where some of those rooms aren't held to the reception norms her home audiences enforce. Her crossover circuit—her 2019 Gunna collaboration on "W;" opening for Harry Styles during Love on Tour (2020), the “Gimme” (2023) collaboration with Sam Smith and Jessie Reyez; the Kendrick Lamar and Lionel Richie features on her debut album *Gifted* (2022)—places her inside an industry ecosystem whose pop, hip-hop, and R&B audiences don't adjudicate her Caribbean authenticity against the same sexual-moral matrix her Jamaican reception does.[303] Jennifer describes the move in adolescence as the choice to “divest from that and invest in the divas and the Black American culture that felt free and radical.” Koffee's career has enacted something structurally similar at the industry scale: a redistribution of which rooms her artistic self gets held in, where the more conservative rooms remain present but are no longer the only rooms that matter.

Her 2025 rebrand signals an ongoing negotiation of where her career is anchored. The move's meaning cannot yet be read, but its timing—three years after the “Gimme” controversy—is legible as a working-out of the terms on which she will remain publicly audible. Raised Seventh-day Adventist and launched inside a reggae ecosystem whose religious and moral

[303]On Koffee’s career arc, Spanish Town origins, and Seventh-day Adventist upbringing, see Spanos 2021.

substrate has been intensively shaped by Rastafari conservatism on one axis and Christian conservatism on another, Koffee has inherited a field her management cannot manage out of existence and has developed a set of responses that, if they share anything with Rose's, share the recognition that full legibility and full career viability are still not available in the same room.

What reading Rose and Koffee alongside Jennifer, Shanice, Colette, and Teresa ultimately makes visible is that the labor the ethnographic subsections document isn't limited to the private sphere and isn't limited to any one generation. Divestment, severed transmission, compartmentalization, and the specific injury Teresa names—of reaching for a Caribbean cultural good only to be cut by the ideological content sedimented inside it—are all operations through which Caribbean queer and trans subjects, whether in a college dorm in the continental United States, a kitchen in Brooklyn, a calypso tent in Port of Spain, or a music video shot in Manhattan, continue to hold their plural selves inside a field whose dominant terms have not yet been rewritten to accommodate them.

The “Too ___ to fit” frame extends across the scale-shift: Rose is too indispensable to Caribbean cultural heritage to be managed cleanly out of queerness, and too queer to be held by the field as the heritage figure the reception apparatus would prefer her to be; Koffee is too visible as the face of contemporary reggae to avoid the speculation and too young an artist in too surveilled a media environment to have the option of managed silence. Neither is failing at Caribbean identity. Neither is Jennifer, neither is Shanice, and neither is Colette. What each is doing, and what this section closes by naming, is the ongoing, costly, and often grief-laden work of being present to more of oneself than the field’s dominant vocabulary currently permits. That this work is being done at all, across scales and across generations, is evidence that the terms

are in the slow process of catching up. The next chapter turns from the conditions under which Caribbean queer and trans selves get held to the spaces in which they can be more fully shown.

The Battle Of Us & I

The friction Caribbean-American participants describe between their two cultures isn't musical. It runs through politics, gender roles, family structure—and most of all through the difference between cultures organized around collective belonging and one organized around individual self-realization. What surfaces across the conversations is that the friction isn't a problem participants have solved. It's a register they've learned to move between, and the moves have costs.

Stuck In-Between: Contrasting Communal Values

When I asked participants where the friction between their Caribbean and American cultural inheritances actually lived, music was rarely where they pointed. Politics, gender roles, and the difference between communal and individualist orientations were where Jennifer and Teresa each took the question. Both worked the same fault line from different angles.

Jennifer located the friction in politics and gender roles. "I don't know that I'll ever fix my man a plate," she told me—the line was its own argument. The expectation she was naming was Jamaican and Black American at once, of a certain generation, and the friction wasn't between her culture and her preferences. It was between two scales of the same culture: the more traditional family scale and the leftist-liberal scale her education had moved her into.

Holland: Have you ever experienced any difficulties or challenges navigating between the

two—the Black American and Jamaican or West Indian identities?

Jennifer: Maybe less when it comes to music and more when it comes to politics. My ideology is very shaped by—well, now it's less shaped by Western ideals because I realize how imperialistic they are—but the individualism, the ideas around leftist and liberal thought. I don't know that I'll ever fix my man a plate. And that's such a Jamaican thing, a Black American thing of a certain generation. I think where a lot of friction is for me is around what place women have in the home, how traditional your values are. That's where I have difficulty navigating. But I can't say Black American ideals are that far removed—in my family, the Jamaican ones tend to be a little more traditional.

Holland: Jamaica is heavy on religion, especially Christianity—strict, disciplinarian.

Jennifer: Right!

Holland: A lot of participants have described tension between their American and Caribbean identities—the Caribbean being very communal and collectivist, and America being very individualist.

Jennifer: Yes! That's what I was also trying to give language to. The Western ideologies I grew up with were very—I remember my growing up experience decidedly feeling less communal and less village-like than my youth and certainly what Jamaica and Caribbean communities feel like.

Holland: Where everyone just chips in, gives and takes.

Jennifer: Yes! That's what I was also trying to give language to. The Western ideologies I grew up with were very—I remember my growing up experience decidedly feeling less communal and less village-like than my youth and certainly what Jamaica and Caribbean communities feel like.

Holland: Where everyone just chips in, gives and takes.

Jennifer: Yes! And neighbors are dropping by, and you call everyone "auntie." That is really not—so there really is a friction and a certain type of code-switching. I can't really call it code-switching because neither culture is the dominant one—it certainly feels like, "Oh, I'm thinking in this way. Oh, I'm thinking in this one."

Holland: Cultural code-switching depending on the space and who's in it.

Jennifer: Exactly. But I do feel like my foundation was brought up a little more individualistic than communal.

What Jennifer named as the source of that individualistic foundation was Saint Ann's—the prep school Prep for Prep had placed her inside, my school too, which is part of why we could talk about it the way we did. The St. Ann's years deepened the individualistic pathways into what she called a schism with her family:

Jennifer: So separated from my community! So separated from what was possible in my community, and then going to St. Ann's—so much of my identity became wrapped up in St. Ann's. It was an experience that none of my family could relate to. So the individualistic pathways became more well-trodden, because I'm having experiences that no one has any touchpoints for within my family.

Holland: Were you finding that challenging—that disconnect of being part of the same

family, but your experiences are so divergent?

Jennifer: I think that was probably one of the hardest—schism feels intense, but kind of—schism between me and my family. I'm getting all these ideas about my politics, and I'm not a religious person. At the same time I'm having these experiences I can't really talk to my family about—they don't have the reference points. So I was so invested in my friends at St. Ann's, so thankful for people like you and Teresa who also had Caribbean heritage and were also going through this. You all became my community, and we could still share the same touchpoints and reference points. And I moved to California pretty much right after high school, which was a testament to how individual my path had gotten.

Holland: You've threaded your own path and you keep treading it.

Jennifer: Yeah. And tie it back to the music—my musical journey mirrors that. My cousins who are a similar age, sure, but I can't say my family is listening to Megan Thee Stallion. My mother loves her now because I love her so much. But my musical tastes have diverged so much from my family because of those experiences. I can't imagine my brother listening to Billie Eilish. And in the flip side, last week he was like, "Oh, you want to go to a Lil Durk concert?" And I said, "What?! I would rather eat denim." Once I started being able to choose for myself—both music and who I am and wanted to be—those experiences really diverged from my family's historical touchpoints.

The schism is partly biographical—the prep-school adolescence put Jennifer inside an experience her family couldn't follow into—and partly structural. The communal grammar her family lived inside was a grammar her institutional education was actively reformatting. She moved to California right after high school. Her music tastes diverged from her family's. The friends she made at St. Ann's, including Teresa and me, became the community her nuclear family couldn't be. What she gained from the divergence was the ability to choose against communal expectation when she needed to. What she mourns from it is that the choosing was available to her at all—that some of her friends, raised inside more thoroughly Caribbean households, can't make it the same way.

Where Jennifer locates the friction at the level of politics and family schism, Teresa locates it inside something closer to social grammar—what friendship is, what giving and taking look like, what counts as a real connection. When I named the communal-individualist split as a frame I'd been hearing across the conversations, Teresa took it historically:

> **Teresa:** Exactly. And historically, that makes us naive. Like the ability for white people to come in and steal us and whatever whatever whatever. The idea that they came and we're communal communities, so therefore, "Oh, you don't have food? Here, here's some food. Oh, you guys are moving here, and you don't know how to grow crops? Here's how to grow crops." And to them, this was naivety. Like, why would you give me everything? Why would you teach me how to do this? Now I'm going to take from you. And it's like, it doesn't cross our minds to take.

What Teresa was naming, in framing the colonial encounter as a misreading of communal generosity, is that giving across difference is itself organized inside a Caribbean spiritual register her American everyday keeps trying to translate as something else. "I give because I know there is a most high that's going to bring it back to me," she said; "karma exists." What reads as naïve to a culture organized around individual accumulation reads, inside the culture doing the giving, as faith in a longer arc of return.

The way that arc shows up in her adult life is in what she called friendship-as-burden. She had run the argument with her younger sister Kira, who told her she didn't ask her friends about their Christmas plans because she didn't want to be annoying:

> **Teresa:** I was like, "Kira, friendship is a burden. Literally being friends with someone is choosing to burden them. Like, I'm going to text you all the time, or I'm going to pop up on you, or I'm going to consistently ask you about that guy you were interested in two weeks ago because I saw him with another girl last week." It's the burden of knowing something about somebody, knowing that you have to give to somebody, and knowing that you have to take from somebody. And if your friend can't equally give and take, then that's not necessarily, in my opinion, a friend.

What Teresa is articulating is a definition of friendship that runs against the default Kira has absorbed—the default that reads the obligation to know and ask and pop up as imposition rather than connection. The communal grammar Teresa names as Caribbean isn't a soft preference for togetherness. It's a structure in which knowing each other is supposed to feel like demand, and in which the absence of demand registers as the absence of friendship. What surfaces in the friction between her and Kira, and between Jennifer and her family, is that the

institutional environments their generations moved through produced different definitions of what owing each other looks like. Kira's American adolescence translated communal demand into bother. Jennifer's California adult life made neighborly drop-ins memory. The friction isn't between a Caribbean self and an American self inside one person. It's between cultural grammars about what belonging-to-other-people is supposed to feel like—grammars that don't always coexist comfortably inside the same room, including the rooms made of their own families.

Choices: Assimilate or Persevere

What gets handed forward across generations is rarely what the generation handing it intends to hand. Choices that look from outside like assimilation are more often, from inside, decisions about survival made under conditions later generations don't have to navigate. Teresa and Colette each described that asymmetry from different angles—Teresa from the receiving end, watching cultural threads thin across her sister's generation; Colette from inside a Thanksgiving argument with parents whose decision not to speak patwa at home had become legible, decades on, as a deprivation.

Teresa was already tracking the thinning at the level of music inheritance. Her own Caribbean coordinates ran through her grandmother and her father, both of whom she counted as Caribbean. Her mother she counted as Caribbean American—"she was in Trinidad for sixteen years," but Teresa located her on the American side of the line. Her younger sister Kira had a Caribbean American mother and a Caribbean American father. The compounding mattered:

> **Teresa:** For me, it was my mom's mom, because technically, my mom is the first generation American, but she was in Trinidad for 16 years. So I consider my mom to be Caribbean

> American, whereas I consider my grandmother to be Caribbean and I consider my dad to be Caribbean. Kira — I have my dad. I had my grandmother. Kira, on the other hand, has our Caribbean American mom and then her Caribbean American father. So I feel like she and — for example, I think that my kids will just be Americans. I think that she is just an American. She has sprinkle of Caribbean in there, like the values and the ideas and stuff like that. But I know for a fact, my sister could not tell you a Caribbean song.

The arithmetic Teresa is doing across generations is calibrated by access to direct cultural transmitters. She had her grandmother. Kira didn't, in the same way. Each generation's distance from the transmitting generation determines what gets carried forward, and what Teresa is naming when she says her own kids will "just be Americans" is the arithmetic running its course.

What Teresa was watching across her sister, Colette had watched argue itself out at a Thanksgiving table. Their sister had confronted their parents about the absence of patwa in the household—a decision their parents had not articulated as a decision until their daughter forced it into the open:

> **Colette:** That argument we had at Thanksgiving—she was really trying to get my parents to understand how they had kind of deprived us from our connection to Jamaican language at home. I don't think they had necessarily thought about it. And she was getting up in arms, like, "You guys don't realize that you were kind of brainwashed to think that it's not a proper language to speak, and because of that, we're not able to speak it." And they were like, "Oh, you know, you're kind of right, but it's not something we did intentionally, and we had to protect ourselves and all these things."

The asymmetry the argument surfaces runs across both Teresa's account and Colette's. The decision Colette's parents made—not to speak patwa, to enforce Standard English in the home—wasn't experienced by them as a loss. It was experienced as the protective adaptation that let them survive American schools where their accents had been mocked. By the time Colette and their sister were old enough to register what hadn't been transmitted, the case for protection had become invisible. What their parents carried as survival had become, inside the next generation's experience, deprivation.

Age at arrival is what calibrates the asymmetry. Colette's mother arrived younger and assimilated more thoroughly; their father arrived older and retained more of his Jamaican fluency:

> **Colette:** My dad can sit down with a Jamaican person and have a conversation in patwa and feel very comfortable and at home in his Jamaicanness. My mom—we went to Jamaica, and she was not able to not sound like a tourist. So the effect has been very different for both of them.

Their maternal grandmother, who arrived as an adult, retained still more—and registered American culture as a place she could survive but not fully translate herself into:

> **Colette:** My maternal grandma didn't come to the States with her kids when they came—when my mom came to the US, she was living with aunts, and my grandma came much later. She ended up working for MTA, and even hearing her talk about her experiences—she's like, "I had no idea that Black Americans were like this." I had never thought about how different it must have been for her, coming over as a Black Jamaican woman and understanding different social norms that existed between whatever she was used to and Black American working culture in New York at that time. She didn't have good things to say. But I think it's fair to view that experience as much different than my parents, who were younger and had much more time to assimilate before adulthood, where it could have been too late or extremely risky to not be able to learn new tricks that would allow for survival.

What runs across both Teresa's and Colette's accounts is that what looks from outside like a single trajectory of generational thinning is actually a bidirectional operation—protective inward, attritional forward. The generation making the adaptation was working under pressure their children don't see; the generation receiving it experiences as loss what the prior generation experienced as survival. Colette's family could later name the decision. Teresa's family couldn't, because the thinning in her household accumulated without anyone authoring it. By the time Kira is sixteen and can't name a Caribbean song, the question of whether anyone chose this is no longer answerable. The case for protection that motivated the adaptation has, across the decades, become invisible—and what the children inherit is the absence of what the parents had to give up, without the visibility of why it was given up.

PRESENT

Present turns from the contested terrain of *Cultural Capital & Legitimacy*—where the clashes, marginalizations, and communal-individualist frictions of adult Caribbean-American life were mapped—to the everyday labor through which participants sustain their Caribbean identifications in the face of those pressures. This half of Chapter 3 traces two registers of that labor through its two sections: *Cultural Preservation* and *Redefining Belonging*.

Cultural Preservation examines what participants actively work to maintain: the family fetes and shared experiences that continue the communal apparatus of childhood, the shift from passive childhood listening to active adult engagement with Caribbean popular music, the embodied experiences through which musical reconnection becomes a mode of self-making, and the challenges of cultural transmission that arise when the conditions that made the inheritance ambient in childhood—the grandmothers' kitchens, the Saturday cleaning soundtracks, the driveway bashments—no longer reproduce themselves without participants deliberately producing them. *Redefining Belonging* examines how participants locate or construct the environments in which Caribbean cultural life registers as home, and how they calibrate what of themselves each located environment can receive—the dual operation of finding the room and showing up inside it that adult Caribbean-American belonging now requires.

The shift from *Cultural Capital & Legitimacy* to *Present* is the shift from what the adult landscape does to the participants to what the participants do inside it. What *Present* establishes is that the belonging these participants hold is not residual—it is not the fading trace

of a childhood inheritance. It is active, intentional, and performed under conditions that Caribbean cultural life no longer supplies unprompted.

Cultural Preservation

What kept Caribbean cultural life ambient in childhood—grandmothers cooking through the morning, speakers in driveways, Sunday cleaning soundtrack, short commutes to the Labor Day parade—as the medium one moved through rather than something one reached for no longer reproduces itself unprompted in participants' daily habits. Grandparents have passed. Households have scattered. Beloved brick-and-mortar venues have folded under gentrification. The labor that now holds what the ambient apparatus once held is what this section investigates.

Participants carry their Caribbean cultural inheritance into adulthood as artifacts they actively preserve—the music, the foodways, the language, the recipes, the family rituals—and the labor of preservation has itself become part of what is preserved. This section's two arcs, *Music Is the Unifying Force* and *Reinforcing Caribbean Rootedness*, build that argument from different registers. *Music Is the Unifying Force* works at the register of listening, where the music remains accessible at the peripheral (global) scale but where the intermediary (communal) scale's thinning has shifted the holding work onto the participant herself. *Reinforcing Caribbean Rootedness* works at the broader register of cultural maintenance—foodways, language, family rituals, the inherited domestic practices that organize Caribbean adult life—where the lines of transmission that did or did not stay open across generations become the arc's analytical

material. Together, they trace a single labor across two registers: the labor of holding, in adulthood, what childhood held ambiently.

What *Cultural Preservation* refuses is the framing that treats this labor as diminishment. Participants aren't performing reduced versions of an earlier inheritance; they're doing the work that keeps Caribbean cultural life present in their adult days, and the labor they perform is the form preservation now takes. *Redefining Belonging* will pick up the corresponding question of conditions; *Cultural Preservation* asks what that preservation consists of when delivery is no longer continuous.

Music is the Unifying Force: Cultural Modes of Listening

Listening to Caribbean music in adulthood is not what listening was in childhood. The conversations this arc carries kept returning to a single question: what does listening become when the gatherings and venues that once carried it no longer reproduce themselves automatically? The grandmothers' kitchens. The driveway speakers. The parties whose music ran for hours without anyone curating them. The reggae spots whose regulars knew each other. What surfaced across the four accounts wasn't a single answer but a spectrum. The family gathering that still holds the listening continuously. The venues and parties one searches for when the city no longer reliably produces them. The listening one summons inside when no environment supplies it. The listening curated against politics the listener can no longer overlook. What unifies them is not the listening itself but what each adult does to keep Caribbean music transmitting culture when no environment does it for them.

Family Fetes & Shared Experiences

Teresa, the first participant in this arc, locates Caribbean cultural life in the one adult gathering where the communal listening still holds itself together without anyone organizing it: the family fete. When I asked her what about being Caribbean still felt most distinctively Caribbean to her, her answer arrived as a description of the fete and a single formulation that named what makes it work.

> **Teresa:** The Caribbeanness—it's the food, and the overall culture of carefreeness. Carnival, Caribbean is very work hard, play hard. Every Caribbean person I know is a very hard worker, very in tune with what they want to do with their lives and where they want to be, but they'll party with you, and they'll party hard. They'll have that cookout in their backyard and invite everybody over. That is just very culturally communal. My communalness is my Caribbeanness. My individualism, where I'm like, nah, I don't want people in my house right now, I want to do this for myself, I don't want to have to cook a meal for everybody—that's my very American side.

What Teresa's formulation names is the analytical move this segment unfolds. The family fete is not Caribbean because the food is Caribbean or the music is Caribbean. It is Caribbean because the gathering's communal grammar—the cookout in the backyard with everybody invited, the work-hard-play-hard rhythm, the carefreeness held alongside the commitment—is the structure that makes the food and the music legible as home-making rather than ethnic ornament. Strip the communal grammar, and Caribbean food plays as Caribbean food without playing as Caribbean. Keep the communal grammar, and even the smallest gathering can land.

The fete is the form in which the intermediary-communal scale crystallizes for these participants in adult life, and the family fete in particular is where they most consistently locate themselves inside it. Chapter 2's *Family Functions* traced the same configuration operating ambiently in childhood—the gatherings that ran without the children needing to organize them, the food and music arriving through the older relatives doing the work. What has changed in

adulthood is the labor required to keep the form operational. The aunts and uncles who hosted are now hosting less, or have passed; the cousins and siblings who attended are increasingly hosting in their place.

The family fete is where communal listening still produces itself in participants' adult lives—the one Caribbean gathering whose structure delivers the music, the relatives, the food, and the carefreeness together, on its own. Chapter 2's *Family Functions* traced the same gathering operating in childhood, the aunts and uncles and grandparents producing it for the children who arrived inside it ready-made. What has changed in adulthood is who hosts. The aunts and uncles who held it together are hosting less, or have passed; the cousins and siblings who attended are increasingly hosting in their place. What Teresa's account makes visible still holds: the fete remains the one site where Caribbean communal listening produces itself continuously. *Rediscovery* turns to the gatherings and venues where it no longer does.

Rediscovery, Embodied Experiences, & Communal Listening'

Shanice and Colette possess different cultural listening modes for Caribbean popular music, each shaped by the distinct sonic environments of their early lives.[304] Shanice acquired a fully-developed one through continuous, abundant acculturation—her Jamaican-Dominican family and her father's deliberate transmission of Jamaican musical lineage saturated her in Caribbean sound from early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. Colette's, by contrast, could be argued to be extremely underdeveloped. Their early exposure to Caribbean popular music was confined to school and family gatherings, and their home held none of the conditions

[304] Rhodd-Lee 2019; Rhodd-Lee 2022.

such development requires—no one listened to Caribbean popular music, leaving Colette without the sustained immersion other participants describe as foundational. The move to Maryland in middle school cut off even those few points of contact before the cultural mode could take hold in a meaningful way.

Searching: Communal Loss & Displacement

When I asked Shanice where she currently engages with Caribbean music, she mentioned that several of the places she used to frequent had closed. She noted how one in particular, Lovers Rock—a reggae spot in Bed-Stuy she described as queer-friendly—had been one of the main places she visited because "it was more of a vibe."

> **Shanice:** I think that's where there's, like, that distance. When it comes to New York and parties, it's like I'm still trying to—there used to be, like, Lovers Rock and other spaces that were more like, I would say, even though they didn't hold queer events or anything like that, they were queer-friendly, where it was just like all different groups, and everyone just understood each other—it was more of a vibe. But since those places closed down, it's like, I follow Ayanna Heaven, who's mostly a reggae DJ that travels between New York and London and Miami, so I'll go to her parties. But it's like, how do I find that organic space where I'm able to do those types of things, but also have it be queer-friendly? And sometimes you don't always want to feel like you're the only one. So how do you navigate that? Especially when there's not as many Caribbean people that I know—well, I do know them as friends, but they don't always want to go out. We're just hanging out, and maybe we'll go to the parade together or something like that, but in terms of that weekly or monthly organic time to listen to music, I feel like I don't always want to do that by myself. And sometimes I don't always want to—even though I love my partner and I love my friends—sometimes I don't want to have to educate people on these songs.
> **Holland:** You kind of just want to enjoy it and not have to explain.
> **Shanice:** Yeah! And not that they're asking me to explain it, but sometimes I will feel weird. As a guest bringing someone, I would feel weird not explaining it, I guess.
> **Holland:** Yeah, because you don't want them to commit a social faux pas or offend somebody when that's not their intention at all.
> **Shanice:** Yeah, exactly! Or with music—a DJ will drop a song where they feel like everyone should know it. And I've let go of that to an extent. Sometimes they're just like, "People are fine. You just need to let them rock." But there's something about the fact that music is such a mode of connection to me—I'm so used to seeing someone and seeing them sing the whole lyrics too. It's just a different experience, you know? So sometimes you don't always want to do that, if that makes sense.

For Shanice, music is “such a mode of connection” that what she’s lost is a kind of listening, not a kind of place. The “different experience” she names happens when others around her recognize the music the same way she does—when she sees someone sing the whole lyrics with her. Her own recognition is intact. She grew up Jamaican-Dominican in New York. She knows the music. She knows the lyrics. The venues that provided opportunities to mix with other listeners who recognized the music the same way have closed.

At Lovers Rock, Shanice could listen without explaining anything to anyone because she and other listeners engage with the music as equals. Now, her Caribbean friends “don’t always want to go out.” Her partner isn’t always free. When she brings someone unfamiliar to a party, she becomes their cultural translator and guide—listening as both guest and host. The closures have also removed the “weekly or monthly organic time” she names: the rhythm of listening with other people who recognize the music the same way she does.

What remains is partial. She can find pieces of what Lovers Rock held: Ayanna Heaven’s pop-ups supply some of the music; her partner and friends supply some of the company. She cannot find a venue that puts her among other listeners who recognize the music the same way she does.What Shanice’s account names is the scarcity of conditions for communal convergence between listeners who recognize the music the same way. Her own recognition is intact; what has thinned is the supply of rooms that reliably put her among like-minded individuals who consume music in the same way on regular basis.

Colette works against the same scarcity from a different context. Where Shanice’s apparatus took shape inside the New York configurations whose closures she now tracks, Colette’s apparatus took shape under conditions that never supplied those configurations in the

first place—and the labor surfaced in their account is what listening becomes when the convergence between listeners has to be approached from inside.

Conjuring: Communal Embodiment & Sensual Reawakening

When I asked Colette to elaborate on how their rediscovery of Caribbean music in college had helped them feel connected to their sexuality, the answer arrived through a specific contrast: between how the music had reached them as a child and what listening had become once they had to do the work of supplying the conditions themselves.

> **Holland:** Circling back to what you were talking about before, where you were discovering—or we can say rediscovering—connections to your heritage in college through music and how that experience helped you feel connected to your sexuality. Can you elaborate on that?
> **Colette:** Yeah. I think there's a different essence and a different aura around the way that sexuality is such an important part of Caribbean culture that isn't necessarily—I mean, I think there are aspects of sexuality in most types of culture that are visible through music. And so hip-hop, R&B, all of that—it's so hard to extract sexuality from it. But because of my experiences growing up in New York and just being aware of what Jamaican sexuality looks and feels like, and coming into that at a certain age, and wanting to understand and feel how I wanted to develop my connection to even the possibility of feeling like a sexual being, or feeling like I could be attractive or flirtatious or whatever—the excitement and the fun of that, and understanding what to look to for that. I think that still at this point in time, in high school, I still didn't have Black friends, really, but I still listened to Black music, and so I was able to plug into how I viewed desire and sexuality through that.

Colette then turned to a specific moment from their first year of college that they kept circling back to in our conversation:

> **Colette:** So first year, our song that we had to dance to at the party at Wellesley—so funny—was "Body Party" by Ciara. I remember first listening to "Body Party" and being like, oh, like, this is in my straight era. This is when I want to be desirable in the way, or evoke a vibe of attractiveness and sensuality in the way that Ciara does in this song. And I feel the same way with certain Caribbean music, where it's like, okay, I know the way people enjoy themselves to this type of music, and I know when they're singing about women or experiences in these songs—those are the types of things that I desire or want to experience, or the type of sensuality that, even in fifth grade, seeing the kids around me develop in that direction—that always felt like, okay, this is the model for how we act out desirability or sexuality. And I think it's one of the very freeing aspects of Jamaican music and Jamaican culture, how expressive it is in that way. Like, look at carnival.

They went on to describe how their relationship to Caribbean music had evolved from passive childhood exposure into an active, intentional practice of self-making.

Holland: Yeah, sensuality and sexuality are always on full display.
Colette: Yeah, and so not necessarily knowing, like, okay, I want to tap into this, and then hearing certain songs or seeing certain music videos or dances, and being like, okay, this makes me feel like I'm a part of this, or I can imagine myself as a part of this, even if I hadn't gotten there yet. But it felt like something to strive for as that part of my development, of coming into that for myself.
Holland: It almost sounds like in tapping back into Caribbean music and experiencing the sensuality and sexuality, it was giving you a space to play in—to maybe fully discover parts of you that you weren't able to before.
Colette: I think so, yeah. And I was able to experience the same songs that I had heard growing up in a different way, enjoy them and understand them in a different way, and maybe appreciate them more than I did before.
Holland: It gave you memory or association to tie to this thing.
Colette: Yeah, exactly. And also only ever knowing of those songs as things that people are enjoying themselves to—feeling liberated, dancing, laughing, eating and drinking. The fact that I'm hearing this music in spaces of play or social gatherings where people are meant to come together and have a good time and connect—I think that level of playfulness is what rushes back when I hear that type of music. And when I was in high school and college, playing it, and understanding, okay, this isn't my reality right now—I'm not at these parties—
Holland: —right, but you could create it for yourself—
Colette: Yeah. But even understanding that I'm not in these spaces, I can create this space of playfulness and expressiveness and sensuality for myself by listening to this music.
Holland: It sounds like, in being able to connect to the music through experience with other people and having those associations, you were able to find something that feels comfortable.
Colette: Yeah, I would definitely say that.
Holland: It also sounds like it gave you a way to further connect with your identity in a way that maybe had more meaning for you than some of those early experiences.
Colette: Yeah, I mean, my earlier experiences were much more passive, and when I got older and reconnected with the music, it was more active in the sense that when I put on this music—like, if I'm getting ready for something and I'm putting on dancehall—I'm actively curating a vibe for myself. I'm curating a mood and curating how it is that I want to feel, which means excitement, positivity, fun, a sense of being carefree, that sensuality I talked about—all of that. Whereas before, I heard those things as a kid, and in my fourth-grade brain I was aware of those things in the space, but it was much more passive. So then when I play it now, I'm like, okay, I'm conjuring these things very actively.
Holland: So it's like you've made a space for yourself—almost like you're liberating yourself to enjoy the experiences in whatever form they take.
Colette: Yeah, absolutely.

Colette's contrast between passive childhood listening and active adult conjuring is the center of gravity for everything else in their excerpt. The music played around them in Brooklyn while the adults did the gathering, the cooking, the gathering's looseness. Colette absorbed what the music meant without having to engage with it. The Maryland relocation ended that absorption. No environment in the suburb replaced what Brooklyn had supplied, and the music dropped out of Colette's daily life until college.

The Ciara song names what the deliberate listening was initially for when Colette began doing it in college. “Body Party” arrived at Wellesley as the song Colette's first-year dance was built around, and Colette places the moment exactly: "this is in my straight era. This is when I want to be desirable in the way, or evoke a vibe of attractiveness and sensuality in the way that Ciara does in this song." The song supplied a model Colette could practice toward. Caribbean music supplied the same kind of model—what Colette names as "the model for how we act out desirability or sexuality." Both kinds of music were doing the same thing for Colette: giving them a sensual and sexual self the music made available to practice toward.

The reading of what the music was offering was already in place before the deliberate listening began. Colette describes watching their classmates "develop in that direction" in fifth grade and registering, even then, what the music was modeling. What college supplied was the practice—putting on dancehall before going out, building the mood, occupying the sensual position the music names.

Once the deliberate listening was in place, the music acted on Colette's body. They name it directly in the excerpt: "it felt like something to strive for as that part of my development, of coming into that for myself." Dancehall's polyrhythms, heavy bass, and patwa-laden vocals—

what Mann's embodied cognition theorizes as music's channels for shaping identity—gave Colette something to inhabit rather than only recognize. Desire became practicable. Attractiveness became inhabitable. Caribbean music was not the soundtrack to Colette's coming into themselves as a sexual being; it was the medium the coming-into ran through.

What the deliberate listening cannot supply is what Brooklyn had supplied without Colette having to summon it—other people in the same place reading the same music the same way at the same time. The car is solo. Getting ready is solo. Colette names the one exception in the excerpt: "if I'm playing it in the car and the person in the passenger seat next to me is also vibing along with it and singing along with me." The exception specifies what the rest of the listening lacks. The at-homeness Colette describes wanting—listening "with people like me enjoying it with me, people who have similar experiences"—requires other listeners present and reading alongside them, and the solo listening Colette performs cannot itself produce that.

The cultural reconnection reaches Colette, and what the music does in their body follows from it. What does not follow is the at-homeness—the same dual position Colette named in *Nowhere To Go*, where they described listening as both participant and spectator: in it and feeling it, but watching themselves from outside it at the same time. The conjuring reaches what one listener can reach alone. It does not, on its own, reach what listening with others reaches.

Read against each other, *Searching* and *Conjuring* specify two different things the cultural listening mode requires. Shanice's account specifies that the mode becomes communal listening only when other listeners are reading the same music the same way at the same time. The mode operates inside Shanice continuously; the communal mode of listening Lovers Rock provided no longer exists , because the venue that supplied the other listeners is closed.

Colette's account specifies that the mode operates inside the individual listener regardless of whether communal listening is available. The deliberate listening practice activates the mode; Mann's embodied cognition framework specifies what that activation produces in the body; the cultural reconnection that follows is real even when communal listening is not. What the two tracks together make visible is that cultural reconnection can be reached through individual listening practice but communal listening cannot. The communal listening requires conditions the individual listener cannot supply alone.

Circumvention picks up the same arc from a different position. Shanice looks for what Caribbean New York no longer reliably supplies. Colette summons what no environment supplies. Jennifer audits—calibrating which Caribbean music she can still hold against the politics she carries into her listening.

Circumvention: Divas-Centered Listening

Jennifer, this arc's final participant, carries adult listening through a third response to what Shanice and Colette navigate. When I asked her how she would describe her music taste now, her answer arrived as a settled inventory: five songs, all by women, all calibrated to the era she's currently moving through. The audit underneath the inventory is what the conversation unveiled.

> **Holland:** So based on this trajectory, how would you describe your music taste now? Has it changed? Has it stayed the same? Is it still something you can do communally and individually?
> **Jennifer:** I think music for me is maybe less communal? It's hard because I go to parties and those things are inherently communal and inherently around the music being played. To me, it still feels like most of the music I'm listening to is if I'm in the car, if I'm driving somewhere, or if I'm at home, or studying. I think the core of my music tastes was probably solidified. I went to theater school and got my MFA, so musicals are in there now, but the core of my tastes is the same. Also, because of the Spotifys and Apple Musics and playlists, I definitely find more new music now. I would say my taste is more eclectic, even though it's less eclectic than some of my friends. My Spotify Wrapped is pretty much always

dancehall, R&B, reggae, hip-hop, and neo-soul—those are almost always my top genres.
Holland: If you had to tell a story of your life in five songs, what would it be to describe now?
Jennifer: Oh, this is hard!
Holland: Present you.
Jennifer: Beyoncé is still that girl. Okay, maybe I would do "Tyrant." I would do "16 Carriages." I feel like I'm in a very nostalgic—you know, my twenties are sort of…
Holland: Almost over?
Jennifer: Almost over. I'm like, "Okay, what am I doing in the next stage of my life?" And so that song fits. Megan Thee Stallion—I feel like I'm in my "tryna be a boss bitch" era. Maybe "Kiss" or something like, really talking my shit. I feel like I'm in an era of really talking my shit. A fourth song—this will be one of my departures because I was introduced to this artist and at first I was like, "what is this white girl talking about?" But now I'm into it—Billie Eilish. Something very introspective. With maturity comes the sign that sometimes I need to slow down in a way that I didn't have to before. You know, it was all dancehall, all party, all ruckus. And then my fifth song is unfortunately going to be a song by Spice.
Holland: I don't think that's unfortunate. Spice has a great discography.
Jennifer: When she said "pum pum so tight when my man nah fi cheat"? Oh! So that's my five.

Our conversation then turned to her deliberate divestment from male artists—a shift she connected to her growing political awareness and the pervasive misogyny in both Caribbean and American popular music.

Jennifer: I don't listen to men!
Holland: I can see that. You've always been into the divas, so it makes sense.
Jennifer: I've been into the divas! So whenever a woman enters a genre, I will listen to that genre more. I started listening to hip-hop much more when women started getting into hip-hop more.
Holland: Yeah, like Cardi B, Megan—
Jennifer: Yaas! SZA. Nicki, of course—even though we hate her now. She ruined that for—I can't believe she took that from me! She took my whole childhood.
Holland: You've been personally slighted by Nicki Minaj.
Jennifer: Personally! I'm starting a class action lawsuit.

She also reflected on the tension of maintaining affection for Caribbean music that contained problematic messaging.

Jennifer: I also had to retire "Romping Shop" because the message is terrible! Other than the music itself.
Holland: I mean, it's a vibe, but that's kind of half of dancehall. It's like, "which parts am I going to disavow?"
Jennifer: And at what point am I just going to pretend I do not see?

The flat declarative of “I don't listen to men” names the audit's terms. Jennifer's adult listening operates under explicit political criteria—Megan Thee Stallion stays for the “boss bitch era” register her current self moves through; Beenie Man gets retired despite the genre's pull because the message disqualifies the track. The criteria run across her full catalog—hip-hop, R&B, dancehall, neo-soul—producing a five-song self-portrait in which every artist is a woman. The labor of listening, in adulthood, includes deciding what gets to keep its place; engagement and withdrawal are both the listening.

Jennifer’s listening operates by subtraction. Where Colette pulls up the communal frame from inside, Jennifer subtracts the content that frame can no longer hold without conflicting with the politics she now carries. Vybz Kartel and Spice’s “Romping Shop,” once integral to her soundscape, has been retired because the message disqualified the track. Retiring “Romping Shop”isn’t a preference shift. It’s a decision held against criteria—track by track, calibrated to what each piece of content can or cannot do under the political register her adult life has produced.

Jennifer's political stance informs her present-day listening visible. Chapter 3's *Marginality* established it: the early-transition decision to divest from Caribbean cultural spaces whose social codes her presentation could not reliably navigate, and the corresponding investment in Black American culture and the divas. The adult practice picks up where that earlier formation left off. The *Marginality* divestment was wholesale—entire scenes, entire genres. The present-day auditing is granular, track by track and artist by artist. The political move the divestment did at scale is now done at the level of individual content.

The four accounts across this arc surface the same cultural transmission performed under different settings. Teresa settles inside the family fete that still produces the communal listening on its own. Shanice searches for what the city no longer reliably supplies. Colette conjures from inside what no environment now delivers. Jennifer audits which Caribbean music she can still hold. What links the four is that listening, in adulthood, no longer arrives unprompted. Each adult sustains the music by whatever means the situation provides. *Reinforcing Caribbean Rootedness* takes up the broader architecture each adult assembles around the music.

Reinforcing Caribbean Rootedness

Where *Music Is the Unifying Force* tracked how each adult keeps Caribbean music in their lives, this arc turns to what each adult inherited from their family: the intentional transmission of Caribbean cultural inheritance, or its absence. *Familial Grounding* follows Shanice, whose family intentionally transmitted Caribbean cultural inheritance through specific relatives who passed down specific artifacts and practices. *A Million Little Cuts* follows Colette, whose family transmitted nothing across three generations. What each adult brings into adulthood depends on what their family did or did not transmit.

Challenges in Cultural Transmission: Tracing Lines of Inheritance

Familial Grounding: Tracing Matrilineal & Patrilineal Transmissions

When I asked Shanice what cultural artifacts or heritage practices helped her feel most connected to her Caribbean identity, she distinguished between physical artifacts and active practices of transmission.

> **Shanice:** I mean, there's certain things that make me feel connected that are physical, I guess? Stuff like, matrilineally, all the jewelry I have are what my grandmother gave to me—what my grandmother passed on to my mom, and my mom passed on to me, and I'm supposed to pass down to my children when they're making that transition in growth. So my grandma gave it to my mom in college, my mom gave it to me when I went to boarding school. So those things can make me feel very connected to my culture. The flag makes me feel connected. But the things that always make me feel most connected are more centered on events—not really things. Going back has a certain feeling, being among family for certain events. We do a yearly cookout at my aunt's in Long Island, and all my family from Dominica comes down. And then on my dad's side, going to Connecticut and seeing family. In August, they usually have their version of the West Indian Day Parade around the weekend of my birthday. Hartford's Caribbean culture is so entrenched—especially Jamaican culture in Hartford. And my uncle is very involved in the West Indian social club, which is the main community service organization but also social club and event space. So it's really the events that make me feel most connected, more than a thing.

Her response makes the principle the multi-line architecture runs on legible. Physical objects can carry connection—the jewelry does—but the heavier transmission work happens at events, where the line stays open through the gathering itself. She then turned to the role of food in cultural preservation, noting the distinct culinary traditions of her Dominican and Jamaican heritages and how her ability to prepare traditional dishes functioned as a form of cultural continuity.

> **Shanice:** Food, for sure. Keeping up with the same recipes, knowing how to make things. I knew how to make some stuff on both my Dominican and Jamaican side, because they're different food cultures—different types of places. Dominica is more lake-based and river-based versus beaches. It's a cooler temperature, and it ranges between cool to humid versus cool to hot to humid in Jamaica. So it's more like fish, more pickled stuff, like souce—which is pickled pig foot and stuff like that. And then more British food. I didn't realize a lot of the food was actually historically English food until I went to London—like black pudding, which I remember my grandma eating and finding disgusting, but it kind of reminds me of home. I didn't realize that was considered British breakfast food. Versus Jamaica, which is more entrenched in jerk, curry, different things like that.

The two food cultures don't blend in her account—they coexist as distinct registers, each tied to a different geography of her family. Dominica's cooler, lake-and-river terrain produces fish-forward cooking with souse and other pickled preparations; Jamaica's tropical climate runs

through jerk, curry, and the spice combinations the island is most associated with. Threading through both is a colonial inheritance Shanice did not initially recognize as colonial: Hulme's extended-Caribbean names what the black-pudding moment surfaces. Her grandmother's table held food whose Britishness Shanice did not register as Britishness until she traveled to London. The food culture predates her grandmother and reaches forward into Shanice's own kitchen, where keeping up with the same recipes is one of the practices that keep the architecture open. Language was the line that came up after.

The conversation then segwayed away from food into language and her early memories of her father teaching her patwa.

> **Shanice:** I think the other piece is language—my ability to, I mean, I'm not as good at Creole in terms of Dominica, but Dominican Creole is similar to Haitian in terms of certain French pieces. It's mostly a mixture of French and English and random other slang. But patwa, my ability to learn on the Jamaican side—I remember when I was six, my dad physically told me, "Okay, I'm going to stop speaking to you in English. I'm going to speak to you in patwa." And I think that piece I really want to keep, even though I can speak it back but—
> **Holland:** —the pronunciation's not always—
> **Shanice:** —it feels foreign, yeah, exactly. So with my partner and I, we've talked about how we want to make sure our kids understand this and aren't like, "What are you saying?" Having those pieces is really important.

Butterfield's selective acculturation names what Shanice's father did at the table when she was six. The shift to patwa was a strategic choice—preserving a marker most diasporic families let attenuate, calibrated against whatever assimilation pressures had thinned the language line in his own family. Shanice has carried it forward as both legible inheritance and ongoing labor; she can speak it back, but the pronunciation is uneven, and she and her partner are now negotiating how to keep the line open for the next generation. What gets selectively preserved at one generation requires selective work at the next to stay operational.

When I asked how music specifically grounded her cultural identity, she pointed back to her father, picking up a thread Chapter 2's *Familial Habits* already started.

> **Holland:** How does music play into this in terms of helping you ground yourself in your identity or preserving that connection?
> **Shanice:** Music has a big hold on how I listen to stuff. My dad still plays on the aux in the car when I'm visiting him. We would always do our own dinners, and he'd have stuff playing on shuffle, and he's really informative about all the artists. He also has personal stories with some of them. He used to be a music journalist for BET and Jet—he had a music magazine, and he was still a lawyer, but he got this opportunity to write and could go to concerts for free. That's actually how he met one of my uncles, who's a writer too. So he has both sides—growing up in Jamaica, he watched a lot of people get big, like Black Uhuru and groups that grew up in Waterhouse and ended up winning Grammys. He's still good friends with a lot of Bob Marley's bandmates, just through growing up together. And his natural music interest in lyricism—that's why his world is so eclectic, why the type of reggae he likes ranges from Lucky Dube to Billy Joel. And when we'd do these drives, if a song came on shuffle, he'd be like, "Okay, this is what this song is about," and we'd listen to it. So for me, music makes me feel connected because I still know this—I still am rooted in this, even though I'm in a completely different place. The struggle is figuring out how to update that for now—what music should I listen to keep going? Because there was something so organic about going to those parties.

Music is one of four lines of cultural transmission in Shanice's adult life. The line runs father to daughter—songs alongside the personal stories her father tells about the artists, the lyrical exegesis that surfaces during their drives, the catalog he passes through on shuffle ranging from Lucky Dube to Billy Joel. Shanice has inherited the music and the labor of keeping the line operational under conditions her father's listening did not have to navigate; she names that labor herself when she says she is "figuring out how to update that for now."

The other three transmission lines run alongside it. Family events anchor the first—her aunt's yearly cookout in Long Island, the Hartford West Indian social club her uncle helps run and the August parade weekend that lands on her birthday, each gathering held by a different relative whose presence keeps the line operational. The second is food, threading across both sides of her heritage, with the Dominican and Jamaican kitchens running parallel registers her

cooking has to maintain at the same time. The third is language, the line her father deliberately switched her into at six and the line she is now negotiating with her partner for whatever transmission the next generation gets—patwa, specifically, as the cultural content the language line carries. Put together, the four function as a redundant system rather than as a single inheritance.

Glissant's framework names the structural property running underneath. The architecture the four lines of transmission construct works rhizomatically. Each line is held by a different transmitter across her family—her grandmother's jewelry, matrilineal food practices and recipes, family gatherings, her father's musical knowledge and language transference. No single transmitter holds the architecture together; no one line carries the others. That multi-source structure is what makes the architecture tensile. When one line attenuates, the others continue.

A Million Little Cuts: Salvaging Compounded Transmission Failures

Colette names the asymmetry their family carries before I finish the question. When I asked what cultural artifacts or heritage practices most grounded their Caribbean identity, the answer surfaced what three generations of attenuation have produced.

> **Colette:** I think through the food—the food was a much more consistent aspect of my connection to the culture, because I was still getting that at home. My mom doesn't like to cook, but my grandma's house was right down the street, and I would always eat over there, and wherever I went we were finding Jamaican food. But the music was a less consistent aspect of my connection to the culture. With my mom's house and my grandma's house being the two places I grew up, and neither of those households really playing Jamaican music—I talked to my aunt and my grandma the other day, and my grandma was like, "Yeah, even when I was in Jamaica, I didn't listen to Jamaican music." And my aunt and my mom both being like, "Yeah, if we're out at some type of event and it's playing, we're going to enjoy it, but we don't seek it out ourselves. If I pull up Bob Marley right now, my mom is going to sing along to every word, but she's not going to go and look up Bob Marley actively by herself."

The asymmetry runs across three generations. Food has been transmitted continuously: the grandmother's house down the street, the recipes carrying forward, the family's ongoing search for Jamaican food in whatever city they end up in. Cultural transmission via music has not. Colette's grandmother told them she didn't listen to Jamaican popular music even when she lived in Jamaica. Their mother and aunt enjoy it when it appears at events but don't seek it out themselves. Their parents' household ran on American music when Colette was growing up.

Their grandmother's stance points back to the conditions the introduction tracks. In mid-twentieth-century Jamaica, sound system culture and the music it circulated—ska, rocksteady, reggae, dancehall—were tied to working-class communal spaces and to ideological coding the colonial and post-colonial states actively repressed. Cohen and Story's work on respectability politics names what stance toward that music was available to a Jamaican woman navigating class aspirations: a refusal to associate herself with the cultural production of the dispossessed.

Butterfield's selective acculturation describes how the stance carries forward. What gets selectively preserved at one generation under one set of pressures becomes the inheritance the next generation receives. The patwa decision *Choices: Assimilate or Persevere* tracked at Colette's parents' generation runs in continuity with the grandmother's earlier decision on a different transmission channel. By the time Colette begins their cultural preservation work as an adult, music has been the most attenuated channel across three generations, and food has been carrying the heaviest weight throughout. What gets actively preserved in the present calibrates accordingly.

They also reflected on their sister's aversion to spicy food, which the family jokingly framed as a test of Jamaican identity, and noted that they felt a personal responsibility to preserve cultural practices like cooking.

> **Colette:** My sister will eat whatever my grandma makes—the only thing is she doesn't like spice, or Black pepper, or pepper flavor. And so we always used to joke like, "Oh my gosh, are you even Jamaican?" But besides that, I'm actually not sure how she feels about her connection to Jamaican culture.

The "are you even Jamaican" frame is the same *"Too ___ to fit"* register the chapter has been working with at multiple scales—legitimacy contests around proximity, around language, around presentation, now arriving as a joke at a kitchen counter. What's specific about its arrival here is that the test happens at the food line, the line that has survived the music attenuation across three generations. When other lines of cultural transmission have closed, the surviving lines carry additional weight as identity-tests within the family. Colette's sister fails the spice-test the way a sibling who couldn't speak patwa would have failed a different test in a different generation; the testing relocates as the architecture changes, but the testing itself doesn't go away.

What the moment crystallizes is the recognition the segment has been building toward. Colette's family is living inside the cumulative result of transmission erosion across multiple generations, multiple channels, and multiple structural pressures: the grandmother's stance under Jamaican sociopolitical conditions, the parents' patwa decision under American assimilation pressure, the music's intermittent presence in the household across decades, the gradual closing of channels none of the family was structurally positioned to keep open. Death by a million tiny cuts. By the time Colette begins the work of cultural preservation as an adult,

the multi-line transmission architecture they have to work within is the accumulated product of conditions that predate them. The preservation work calibrates to what survived.

Glissant names what the inherited multi-line architecture is: rhizomatic, with multiple lateral channels of cultural transmission still running and no single source from which the others descend or could be restored. Colette's preservation labor extends laterally through what survived—the food line carrying the heaviest weight, the search for Jamaican food in whatever city they end up in, the grandmother's house when it was down the street—not toward restoring channels that closed before they had a chance to inherit them.

What Shanice and Colette's accounts make clear is that family transmission of Caribbean cultural inheritance is not automatic—it depends on whether specific relatives intentionally transmit it. Shanice's mother and maternal grandmother passed down tangible cultural artifacts and cooking practices; her father made sure she inherited Jamaican patwa, music knowledge, and music history whereas Colette's family transmitted nothing. The only Caribbean cultural exposure Colette and their siblings received was their grandmother's Jamaican cooking. Their contrasting experiences demonstrate that intentional family transmission produces one kind of adult Caribbean cultural inheritance, and its absence produces another.

Lines of Transmission: Detangling the Bundle of Threads

Cultural Preservation demonstrates that Caribbean cultural inheritance, in the diaspora, does not pass forward by itself. *Music Is the Unifying Force* shows each adult keeping Caribbean music present after the gatherings and venues that once carried it together have thinned. *Reinforcing Caribbean Rootedness* widens the frame to the broader practices of Caribbean cultural life—

food, language, family events, and music—and shows each adult keeping alive whichever practices have stayed within reach.

Music Is the Unifying Force moves through four participants—Teresa, Shanice, Colette, Jennifer—revealing the different paths each takes to stay connected to Caribbean music as adults. Teresa keeps Caribbean music in her life through the family fete, where the gathering itself still produces communal listening. Shanice goes looking through the city for what closed venues used to give her—the pop-ups, the traveling parties, the Caribbean spaces that still hold pieces of it. Colette builds the listening from inside themselves, dressing to go out while the music does what no environment in suburban Maryland supplies. Jennifer decides track by track which Caribbean music she can still hold, weighed against what she has come to know about the genre's record on women, queerness, and harm. *Reinforcing Caribbean Rootedness* surfaces two states of this broader maintenance across Shanice and Colette. Shanice maintains Caribbean cultural life across four pathways at once, each held open by a specific relative. Colette maintains Caribbean cultural life through the food pathway primarily, because the others closed in earlier generations before Colette could inherit them. What links all six accounts is Glissant's rhizomatic principle: Caribbean cultural inheritance does not run from a single original source. It runs through multiple lateral pathways, and what each adult can keep depends on which pathways have stayed open.

What each adult keeps, then, is neither given nor recoverable; it is something each adult continues to make. The childhood scene that supplied it unprompted—grandmothers' kitchens, driveway speakers, family fetes, the venues where regulars knew each other—does not survive into adulthood, where the gatherings, venues, and relatives that produced it have scattered.

What replaces it is whatever pathways each adult can still hold together. *Redefining Belonging* turns from this maintenance to what each adult locates and constructs once the home Caribbean cultural life used to supply no longer arrives on its own.

Redefining Belonging

What gives a Caribbean-American adult their sense of belonging today is no longer what gave it to them as children. Earlier chapters traced the apparatus that once held it in place: the driveway bashments, the grandmothers' kitchens, the soca-soundtracked Saturday cleanings, the Brooklyn block where every other family was Caribbean. What adulthood has unevenly withdrawn is the continuity of that supply. Grandparents have passed. Households have scattered. Caribbean venues have closed under gentrification. Belonging, for the participants in this section, is no longer an inheritance they live inside but an operation they perform—under conditions Caribbean cultural life no longer supplies unprompted.

Locating Cultural Loci in (Un)Familiar Places

This section gets at a question most of my participants kept returning to in different forms: where does Caribbean music still register as home for an adult whose everyday life isn't already saturated with it? The conversations circled four answers, and what emerged across them is that the locus of home-registration has stopped being a location. It's become an operation that has to be built, caught, searched for, or traveled back to.

I asked Colette whether listening to Caribbean music in adulthood produced the sense of belonging the conversation was circling. Their answer redirected the question. The music in itself, they told me, wasn't really the variable. What mattered was whether it was landing inside a community or outside one—and outside one, they explained, the music had historically dropped out of their life altogether.

> **Holland:** It almost sounds like you enjoy it more when you feel like you have a community, or you're belonging to a community, rather than being a tribe of one.
> **Colette:** Yeah, for sure. That's a big part of it.
> **Holland:** So community is really the resonating factor for you?
> **Colette:** I think so. I think that's the case for a lot of things and just me in general as a person. And I think that is why it was so easy for me to detach from the music when I wasn't around it anymore — because it's a community activity, a community experience, and the way I grew up with it was as a community experience. You take out the community, and the music was gone from my life as well. Not to say that I don't have Movado in my Spotify playlist and I'm not skipping him if he comes on, but I am enjoying it more if I'm playing it in the car and the person in the passenger seat next to me is also vibing along with it and singing along with me.

What struck me about Colette's framing was that they answered the general before the specific. Community, they said, is the resonating factor "for a lot of things and for me in general as a person." Only inside that broader disposition does Caribbean music get located. The music doesn't come pre-loaded with home in their account. It enters a person whose receptivity is community-dependent, and the home-feeling falls where the community happens to be. The passenger seat is the smallest version of that condition: a single second voice singing along is enough to convert a Movado track from playlist filler into something closer to what the music did at Sunday gatherings at their grandmother's house.

What Colette describes is the SMT framework at work: Caribbean popular music operating across the three concentric scales of the immediate, the intermediary, and the peripheral. However, something surfaces at this adult register that didn't at the adolescent

one—what happens after the move. Take away the intermediary scale, and the immediate can't sustain itself. The music is technically still there; Spotify still has Movado. But meaning needs a room to hold it, and the room is gone.

Maryland took the room away. Colette's family moved when they were twelve, and the New York apparatus—the grandmother down the street, the aunts' gatherings, the block where Caribbean music spilled through front doors—did not travel with them. The years that followed weren't a loss of interest. They were the music going quiet because nothing in the suburbs activated it. Colette didn't unlearn dancehall. They lost the conditions under which knowing it mattered. What returned, years later, is what they call conjuring:

> **Colette:** My earlier experiences were much more passive, and when I got older and reconnected with the music, it was more active in the sense that when I put on this music—if I'm getting ready for something and putting on dancehall—I'm actively curating a vibe for myself. I'm curating a mood, curating how I want to feel: excitement, positivity, fun, a sense of being carefree, that sensuality. Whereas before, I heard those things as a kid, and in my fourth-grade brain I was aware of them, but it was much more passive. So when I play it now, I'm like, okay, I'm conjuring these things very actively.

The verb is precise. As a fourth-grader in Brooklyn, Colette received Caribbean music as the ambient condition of other people's gatherings—the food cooking, the laughter from the driveway, the grown-ups being loose. As an adult in Maryland, alone in the car, dressing to go out, they pull up dancehall on Spotify and do, by themselves, what the grown-ups had done without knowing they were doing it. The atmosphere has migrated from outside them to inside them. What used to be supplied by the room now has to be summoned. Home, in Colette's adult framing, isn't where the music plays. Home is wherever they can build the conditions under which the music does what it's supposed to do.

What Colette has to build from scratch, Sandy can sometimes catch in passing. Her account is about a community that became less continuous without being replaced—and the question that opens up is what happens to the music when the apparatus thins but doesn't disappear. Earlier chapters traced Sandy's Brooklyn childhood as a Belize-on-a-single-block: parents downstairs, grandparents upstairs, aunts moving onto the same block as apartments opened up, summertime driveway bashments anchored by speakers run on extension cords through the kitchen window. Music was the medium in which family bonding happened—"the backdrop," she put it; "whenever music was playing, I knew that we were bonding in some shape or form." Her grandfather, the one who kept the parties going, passed away a few years before our interview. Her fiancé is from the Bronx, and his family's gatherings move through a different musical geography. The driveway is memory. What surprised Sandy, and surprised me when she told me about it, was that the apparatus could still reach her even after it had thinned.

> **Sandy:** I was at my company holiday party, like on Thursday, and they played [a song my grandfather loved], and I was like, whoa. I was like, wow. I was like, deep cut, okay. But it really shocked me, because—I mean, in all fairness, it was like the ERGs, the affinity groups at the company that was throwing the party, so they were playing like more cultural music, if you will. But that's definitely one song that really brings back a lot of memories, because even whether it was like 2006 or like 2022, anytime that song comes on, everyone gets like super excited. Everyone's dancing, having a good time.
> **Holland:** It was like your grandfather's kind of playlist.
> **Sandy:** Yeah, yeah, that was definitely one of his go-tos.

The specificity matters. This isn't a Caribbean party. It's a corporate holiday party whose Caribbean dimension exists because employee resource groups got handed the playlist—a workplace-affinity-group filtration of what the driveway used to broadcast continuously. Sandy didn't curate the room. She walked into someone else's curation, and a single track—"Tiny Winey"—carried her grandfather, the driveway, and the summers he presided over into a

corporate event that had nothing to do with any of them. What Colette has to build, Sandy can be visited by, because the Belizean coordinates her grandfather's playlists laid down—Supa G, the Punta that "really would get the party started," the songs he kept returning to—are organized around an interiority any room playing the music can reach. The locus hasn't disappeared. It's gone intermittent, waiting on rooms she didn't have to organize.

Sandy worked out her relationship to her two cultural identities mid-interview. The New York Caribbean identity, she told me, is her American identity. The Belizean sits alongside it as something familial, held closer to the chest. The regional amalgamation her young-adult listening produced—hearing the diaspora as a single genre rather than a set of country-specific sounds—is what makes her feel like a New Yorker. The Belize-specific markers—Supa G, Punta, the songs the driveway favored—are what her cultural interiority is privately organized around, even after the apparatus that once broadcast them has thinned. As an adult, Caribbean music doesn't have to be sought out the way Colette has to seek it. It has to be available to. Sandy's openness to the moment a track surfaces is what now stands in for the continuity her childhood lived inside.

What Sandy can do—receive Caribbean music wherever it surfaces and have it reach her—is what Shanice can't, and the difference is structural. Sandy's interiority requires only the Caribbean dimension; any room playing the music reaches her. Shanice's full self isn't organized around a single dimension. The rooms she needs are rooms that can hold her at the intersection of three: Black, queer, and Caribbean, in one place at the same time. That kind of room used to exist for her. Recently it has stopped existing the way it used to. When I asked her where she

still goes for the feeling Sandy can catch off a track, the answer started with a venue that had closed:

> **Shanice:** It used to be this place, Lovers Rock, but it closed down in Bed-Stuy. It was more of a vibe—chill music, reggae, they played a little bit of Afrobeats, but it was essentially a reggae spot. That used to make me feel like home.

The past tense ran through the whole sentence. A place she could name, a feeling she could name, both spoken in a grammar that no longer applied. Lovers Rock wasn't explicitly queer, she told me, and that wasn't a deficit—it was the point. The room was "queer-friendly without naming itself queer," the kind of place where "everyone was just doing their own thing," and the absence of declaration was what made entry safe.

What she's been doing since it closed is following partial substitutes. Shapes, the party that rotates between London, New York, and Miami, lets her hear "all the different types of music I like, whether it's UB40 or old reggae and then Dexa Daps or whatever" inside what she calls "Blackness and safety." Studio 151 above Nu Blue in the East Village runs DJs for a listening-and-dancing crowd. The Record Club between New York and LA plays albums straight through. None of them does what Lovers Rock did. Each does a piece of it. What Shanice is doing, in following them, is reconstructing across a dispersed network what one Bed-Stuy venue once held in a single room.

What named the geometry for me was when she described the configurations the city now reliably produces. There are spaces that hold Black-and-queer but are "more hip-hop and R&B forward" and not Caribbean. There are Caribbean spaces that aren't queer-affirming. There are queer spaces that "even if they're POC, they're not Black." The market has gotten good at organizing around any one or two of those dimensions. It has stopped reliably producing rooms

that hold three. The closest recent example, she said, was Funky Reggae House Party—whose founders were leaving New York for Trinidad after their Brooklyn location failed to open. The venue that had explicitly named what Shanice was looking for, "we are prioritizing Black and queer at the forefront," had folded under the same gentrification pressures thinning brick-and-mortar spaces across Brooklyn. What Crenshaw's analysis of intersectional erasure names structurally—positions at the intersection of multiple axes disappearing from spaces organized around any single one—Shanice has been mapping venue by venue. The configurations the city produces at scale are the ones her full self can't be received into.

What Shanice does in response isn't Colette's reconstruction—she can't build Lovers Rock alone in her car—and isn't Sandy's catching of echoes, because the echoes she'd be catching require a room that isn't there to throw them. What she does is segment and sequence. Shapes supplies Caribbean musical range; Nu Blue, listening intentionality; the Record Club, the album as event; concerts, the communal charge; pop-ups followed through social media, whatever the network of DJs is currently assembling. The bundle gets distributed across the calendar because no single room is currently equipped to hold it. Home, for Shanice, is a configuration she assembles across multiple rooms, each holding a piece of what one room used to hold continuously.

Where Shanice's case is about a city that can no longer assemble the configurations she needs, Teresa's is about a city that has stopped assembling Caribbean cultural life at all. When I asked her where she felt most at home, her answer arrived as the description of a kind of room rather than the name of a place:

Teresa: I'd have to say a Caribbean space. Even if I'm not necessarily the most Caribbean

> in the room, or I'm the only one without an accent in the room. The accent is soothing. The food is something that reminds me of my grandmother. The communalness of it is what reminds me that we're not alone in this big, broad world. The music is nostalgic, so even when they make new music, it's still the same feel and sense. So yeah—if I was having the worst day possible and I had to find a place for me to really sit and feel at home and feel safe and feel comforted, it's a place where my mom and dad are, or just people with an accent, people are cooking, and there's music and songs being danced to.

What lands in that paragraph is the qualifier—"even if I'm not necessarily the most Caribbean in the room." The room she's describing isn't one she's central to. It's one whose ambient texture is Caribbean enough that she can settle inside it without performing. The accent, the food, the communalness, the music that stays recognizable "even when they make new music"—these are the components of what she named elsewhere as the axial difference between her two cultures: "My communalness is my Caribbeanness. My individualism, where I'm like, nah, I don't want people in my house right now… that's my very American side." The formula reads almost too clean, but the analytical move underneath does the work the rest of the conversation has been building toward. Caribbean space functions as home not because the music is Caribbean or the food is Caribbean. It functions as home because the gathering is communally organized, and that communal grammar is what makes the food, the accent, and the music legible as home-making rather than ethnic ornament. Strip the grammar and Caribbean music plays as Caribbean music without playing as home. Keep the grammar and even a song she's never heard before can land.

What Atlanta did to Teresa is what Maryland did to Colette: it took the everyday communal apparatus away. Georgia Tech was Caribbean-thin in a way New York hadn't been. The parties she went to in undergrad didn't play any Caribbean music, and the absence came as a quiet shock: "I was like—is this not fun anymore? Like, do I not like to party anymore?" What she found in response was a single recurring anchor. Rum Punch Brunch, a free monthly summer

event in Atlanta, plays "really more dancehall and reggae" to a room that fills up with Caribbean people, and that, she told me, "is where I feel at home." When she's homesick or having a bad week: "Oh my god, it's June, Rum Punch Brunch, guys, let's go." The room works because it reconstitutes the same communal grammar her New York life used to supply continuously, under summer-only conditions in a city that won't supply it ambiently.

The same configuration, at its highest pitch, was what Teresa found at Trinidad Carnival earlier the same year. Her first time. She was on the parkway in costume, her phone propped on a music truck so she could record herself dancing, and what happened next is what stayed with her:

> **Teresa:** One lady come from the right side, another lady come from the left side, another man came, and they're all in my video, just dancing, throwing their butt on me, doing all this stuff. I have no idea who these people are at all. And then I get my phone, turn it off, everybody gave each other a little hug, a little pound, whatever, and went about their business. I was just like — this is what music does. I don't need to know your name. I don't need to know where you're from. We don't need to be best friends. But in this moment, we're both consuming and we're just having a good time.

Teresa's word, "Consuming," best characterizes the moment. Three strangers on a Port of Spain parkway were consuming the same cultural object at the same time—a soca track, a moving truck, a shared forward momentum down the road—and that common consumption, for the duration of the song, generated the configuration that Lovers Rock used to produce on a Bed-Stuy block and Rum Punch Brunch produces in summer in Atlanta: a room of people who are temporarily her people because the music is making them so. The hug and the pound at the end weren't the start of friendships. They were the punctuation closing a moment whose structure depended on being temporary.

What these four conversations have been tracing is one operation performed under four different conditions. Colette rebuilds the communal frame from the inside when no room around her supplies it. Sandy catches its echoes when Caribbean music arrives intermittently in rooms curated by others, because her Belizean-specific interiority survives any room that plays the music. Shanice finds or assembles configurations the city produces less and less reliably, because what she needs from a room is for it to hold her at three intersections at once. Teresa travels back to recovered frames—Rum Punch Brunch, Carnival, the Caribbean room with her parents in it—because Atlanta's everyday won't produce the communal grammar her Caribbean legibility requires. What links the accounts isn't a shared geography or method. It's that each woman is performing labor her childhood didn't require: locating the conditions Caribbean music needs to register as home, building those conditions when they aren't supplied, and accepting that the labor takes different forms depending on what each adult life makes available. The locus has stopped being a place. It's become an operation.

Showing Up As Your Full(ish) Self: Strategic Identity Deployment

Once participants have located the rooms in which Caribbean cultural life registers as home, the question doesn't close. It opens onto a second one: what of themselves the located rooms are equipped to actually hold. Each locating operation was already, in its shape, a decision about what each participant was willing to show up as. Colette's reconstruction presupposes the willingness to reconstruct. Sandy's openness is available because she's available to it. Shanice's pop-up-following and Teresa's traveling-back are decisions weighed against what each

available room could and couldn't accommodate. What this subsection follows is what the labor of showing up looks like once the room has been entered.

Jennifer's account is where the operation became most visible to me. She described it happening across the arc of her transition, and the change in which rooms she could enter—and which parts of herself those rooms received—tracked directly with the change in how her body was being read inside them. When I asked her whether her current club-space preferences leaned American or Caribbean, the answer arrived as a timeline rather than a preference:

> **Jennifer:** It's all interconnected and connected with more of your identities. I think as I got further in my transition and able to just exist in spaces as a woman and not—unfortunately, the possibility politic of it—I'm able to just go in more places and not be, I guess, clocked. And I think that has allowed me to go back into Caribbean parties, Caribbean spaces. Because when I was in early transition, girl, I can't have seen me. Good luck to me! I can't have seen me confidently walking into those places—and maybe certain spaces would have been fine, but I was not taking that gamble. So now, in lots of ways, things are coming full circle. It's the Saturn Return of it all. In a lot of ways, things are coming full circle. So I do mean American clubs, but I also mean Jamaican and Caribbean outings in general that I hadn't really incorporated in my social sphere since young, young teens.

“Coming full circle,” in her account, isn't a return to a prior self. It's that certain Caribbean enclaves have become re-enterable—because her body now reads differently inside them. The rooms haven't changed. She hasn't, in the sense of becoming more Caribbean or less trans or differently politically aligned. What's changed is what each room can hold of her. The *Marginality* arc laid the ground earlier: the homophobia and transphobia of Jennifer's Jamaican household, her father whose positions she named flatly as “homophobic… transphobic, he was all the things,” and the divestment that followed in early transition. The Caribbean scenes' communal grammar wasn't something her presentation could reliably move through without being clocked. “I felt so alienated,” she said of that period; “it felt to me like a necessity to divest from that and invest in the divas and the Black American culture that felt like it was free and

radical.” What “coming full circle” extends from that earlier material is what the divestment eventually afforded her—not a reconciliation, but a re-entry.

The distinction matters. Not getting clocked, later in transition, didn't change what the Caribbean enclaves were. It changed what they could receive of her without the reception activating against her. The full configuration—trans-and-Caribbean, in a single room, legible as both—isn't what those rooms hold. They hold the part of her that can enter without their homophobia and transphobia firing. The Caribbean-music-at-a-party part deploys now; the trans-femininity part deploys selectively, contingent on whether the specific room's reading of her body clocks her or doesn't. “The possibility politic of it,” her phrase, names the calculation: which doors open, to which bodies, at which moments, carrying which parts of themselves. What Jennifer has now isn't a resolution to the foreclosure those rooms operate. It's a routing around it on terms the foreclosure itself sets. That the routing is available is what she means by "coming full circle." That it's a routing rather than a reconciliation is what the “(ish)” in the subsection's title is doing. Jennifer is showing up more fully in Caribbean rooms than she could in early transition, and the fullness is real—and conditional on a form of cover her body now supplies.

She named the double edge without my prompting: "I'm thankful for the ability to do that because it's allowed me to love myself a lot more. And then it's something I mourn a little because community is so important." The ability she's grateful for—the ability to divest, to choose herself against communal expectation—is the same ability that revealed what the communal expectation was organized to withhold. She has friends, she told me, who "are like, 'Oh, this would really disappoint my family,' and that's a reason for them not to do something

they love or come out." The divestment path was open to her; it isn't open to everyone. What "coming full circle" now affords is the chance to re-enter Caribbean spaces carrying the divestment's formation with her. The re-entry isn't a return. It's a calibration of what each scene can absorb of who she's become while she was away. The Saturn Return figure is precise: a return to a starting position with everything that has happened since now internal to how the starting position reads.

What Jennifer can route around—being clocked at the threshold—Shanice cannot. Her position at the intersection of Black, queer, and Caribbean isn't one a different presentation of the body could render less visible, and isn't one she would want to render less visible if she could. What she does instead, in the rooms Locating documented her searching across, is select. She named both operations with a single verb: "you still have to segment things." What gets segmented isn't only the geography of enclaves distributed across the city. It's the self that moves through them. In the Black-and-queer scenes that are "more hip-hop and R&B forward," her Caribbean dimension can't deploy. In the Caribbean enclaves that hold the music, her queerness can't. In the queer enclaves that hold queerness, the Blackness that makes the other dimensions legible as home recedes. Segmentation isn't a choice she's making. It's what the geography does to her identity when she moves through it.

What this looks like from the inside surfaced in an exchange where she circled back to Funky Reggae House Party—the venue I noted earlier was the closest thing in recent years to a room that held the full configuration:

> **Holland:** The Black spaces aren't necessarily always queer-friendly. So you have to find a niche somewhere.
> **Shanice:** Yeah. And there was Funky Reggae House Party, but the founders are moving to

> Trinidad. They tried to open up a spot in Brooklyn; it didn't work out. That was maybe the only space where those things melded with "we are prioritizing Black and queer" at the forefront. But it was still more focused on dancing or social and not as much naturally connecting with people. In a time where you're focused on Blackness or queerness, those places I listed were probably the only way where it's like, "Okay, I have this calmness through being able to experience both things at the same time."
> **Holland:** That makes a lot of sense. Whenever you're dealing with identities, so long as you have sexuality and different sexual orientations at play, there's always going to be that contest of "which one's going to win out?" Depending on what space I'm in, which one is the priority? And which one can I encompass the most fully while feeling safe?
> **Shanice:** Yeah, exactly.

"Which one's going to win out" names the deployment question from inside the space. Each environment makes her choose which dimension of her identity the space is equipped to receive most fully, which means choosing which to hold in reserve until the next environment permits a different selection. Funky Reggae House Party mattered because its founders had tried to build a room that refused the question—"we are prioritizing Black and queer at the forefront" as an operating principle—and the failure of its Brooklyn location is what translates Locating's spatial argument into a deployment one. The city isn't only short on the rooms Shanice needs. It's short on rooms in which she wouldn't have to segment herself to enter at all. Crenshaw's analysis of how intersectional positions disappear from spaces organized around any single axis is what this venue map empirically demonstrates. The "calmness through being able to experience both things at the same time" Funky Reggae House Party offered wasn't a fourth dimension layered over three. It was a different arrangement altogether, with a structural capacity the other rooms weren't built to accommodate.

Where Jennifer's deployment runs on whether her body is clocked at the door and Shanice's on which configuration the door opens into, Teresa's runs on something neither: the cultural knowledge each room expects her to produce. Her body isn't what the rooms are

reading. The rooms are reading what she can demonstrate, and her deployment is the work of producing different kinds of demonstration for different rooms. The first place this surfaced in our conversation was her Atlanta undergraduate years, where Southern Black English produced a fluency gap she hadn't expected:

> **Teresa:** When I first got to Atlanta, my roommate acted as a translator. There were moments that I genuinely would be in a circle of Black people talking, and I'd have to turn to her and be like, "what are we talking about?" And she'd go, "Oh, this person just said this. This person just said this." And I'm like, "That is not what they said." Like, you guys are not enunciating your words! And that showed me that it's just being used to it, being grown up in it. It just becomes a second language to you.

The needing-a-translator detail is what stayed with me. Teresa is Black, the ecosystem she's in is Black, the cultural object being passed around the room is Black, and what she experiences inside it is fluency failure. The Brooklyn-PWI cadence Saint Ann's left her with—my school too, which is part of why we could talk about it the way we did—produced a register the Atlanta room read as distance. The same gap repeats with inverted polarity inside her boyfriend Christian's family in Georgia. Their patois fluency is what she can't fully produce, and the room reads her partial fluency as something closer to white-institutional. "I feel particularly kind of like white," she put it, "like I kind of feel like Saint Ann's stole something from me." Against her younger sister Reagan—who went to PWIs from preschool through boarding school—the valence flips again. Teresa's New York Caribbean speech, with its slang and dropped consonants, registers as "particularly Black" next to her sister's careful enunciation of every word. The flicker isn't a failure of identity consolidation. It's how triple identity consciousness[305] behaves when it's lived: each room reads her against a different one of the three locations she

[305] Lorick-Wilmot 2018.

moves among—Caribbean, Black American, white-institutional—and what registers as native in one room registers as foreign in the next.

Teresa names her own position directly: "I have to accept that I am uniquely myself." She can't claim her father's Caribbeanness or her boyfriend's Black-Southernness as if either were simply available to her. What she is has been produced by all three rooms together, and her deployment work is the production, room by room, of whatever cultural material each room is configured to receive.

That work takes different forms. Sometimes what she produces is fluently hers, and the labor is proving its authenticity against the room's skepticism—as in the karaoke moment, when her friends asked how a Black girl from Flatbush had access to songs they hadn't assumed were hers. Sometimes what she produces is only partially hers, and the labor is managing the distance between what she can deliver and what the room expects—as with the patois at Christian's grandmother's house, where she could understand but not respond. Sometimes the work is the biography itself: the account of why her cultural position takes the exact shape it does.

What emerges with particular sharpness in Teresa's case is that the room's reading isn't always a misreading. Her friends misread her access to Black American music—but their misreading is legible, because her "weird middle ground" is real. Christian's grandmother's house foregrounds a fluency she doesn't fully have. The "(ish)" she performs is the work of being present as the full person she is while producing what each room needs to register her as present at all—even when what the room needs sits at the edge of what she can deliver.

Underlaying all three accounts is something Colette's compartmentalization material in Marginality already established: the room is never an abstraction. It's a set of specific people with specific histories, and the deployment question gets answered person by person within each room, not just at its threshold. The cousin Colette no longer speaks to, the parent they trust and the one they don't, the family friend whose phone call turned transphobic—these are the same kinds of relational coordinates Jennifer, Shanice, and Teresa navigate inside every room they enter. Trust built across time is what makes it possible to show up as more of oneself than the room's general reading would allow. The absence of that trust is what makes compartmentalization the safer choice. None of the three focal accounts could have made the calculations they describe without that relational variable underneath.

Running alongside these accounts is Sandy's refusal of the question altogether. When asked about navigating professional spaces, she described not deployment but withdrawal: my Caribbean identity doesn't come out at work. An earlier attempt at the "bring your whole self to work" ethos had left her isolated; she'd learned "the hard way" to be more selective about what aspects of herself were safe to share. The operation Jennifer, Shanice, and Teresa perform isn't universal. Some spaces can simply be declined rather than calibrated against.

What links these accounts is that the spaces participants occupy are all too small to hold their complete selves. Each is calibrating, in real time, what a specific space can hold of who she is, and adjusting what she deploys against what it can receive. The "(ish)" the title refuses to drop is what the calibration produces. No space currently available is holding the whole of who any of these participants is, and the self each shows up as is the self that space is able to receive. The gap between the full self and the received self isn't a failure—of the participants or,

in the abstract, of the spaces. It's the structural condition adult Caribbean-American belonging is being sustained inside.

Next Stop, Home!: Towards Plural Futures

What *Redefining Belonging* has been tracing across both subsections is the shape of an operation that wasn't required of these participants in childhood and is now the medium through which their adult Caribbean-American lives are being lived. The childhood apparatus earlier chapters mapped—the driveway bashments, the grandmothers' kitchens, the saturated Brooklyn block—supplied belonging as the ambient condition of daily existence. What's changed isn't that participants have lost their Caribbean identifications. What's changed is that the conditions sustaining those identifications have stopped reproducing themselves without participants actively producing them. Locating documented the work of finding, building, catching, and traveling back to the rooms in which Caribbean cultural life still registers as home. *Showing Up* documented the work of calibrating what those rooms can hold once they've been entered. The two operations run at once, not in sequence. What they together describe isn't a diminished version of an earlier belonging. It's the active form belonging now takes for adult Caribbean-Americans whose childhoods built them inside conditions adulthood no longer ambient-supplies. What follows takes up what this labor has been making.

4. Home Is Where the Heart Is: Locating “Home” in the In-Between

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Chapter 4, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, is where the dissertation's argument arrives. Where *Liminality* showed that adult Caribbean belonging is no longer inherited but actively built, *Home* asks what that building produces, and answers the question the dissertation opened with: where is home in the diaspora?

The chapter argues this through the *Home* part's two sections. *Transcultural Permutations* names what the participants construct: the New York Caribbean, a transcultural and pluralized self-description American racial discourse offers no name for. The section establishes the New York Caribbean as a collective proposal whose plurality is constitutive—no participant's version exhausts it, and no version cancels another's. *Born Foreign* then names the position these participants occupy that American belonging has no category for, and asks where this constructed self finds home. The participants' accounts converge on a relational answer: home is not a fixed place but the presence of people who have witnessed enough of the participant's complexity to make performance unnecessary.

What Chapter 4 demonstrates is the dissertation's thesis ethnographically: that Afro-West Indian Americans use Caribbean popular music as a contact zone for transcultural identity construction, that what they construct is a pluralized self the existing categories cannot hold, and that home—for a generation born in the United States and raised inside Caribbean households

whose customs differed from the country around them—lives not in any place but in the people willing to see them fully.

HOME

Home demonstrates of the dissertation's thesis. Where *Liminality* showed that adult Caribbean belonging is no longer inherited but actively built, *Home* asks what that building produces and where the dissertation's founding question—where is home in the diaspora—finally lands. The part is organized into two sections that work together to deliver the chapter's argument: *Transcultural Permutations* and *Born Foreign*.

Transcultural Permutations: New York Caribbean Identity names the formation that takes shape when Caribbean popular music operates as a contact zone within New York City's dense multi-island geography. Across its three arcs—*Synergy*, *Caribbean vs. Black American*, and *Severing Rhizomes*—the section establishes the New York Caribbean as a transcultural and pluralized self-description whose plurality is constitutive: no participant's version exhausts the formation, and no version can be ruled out by another's. *Born Foreign: Locating "Home" in Liminal Spaces* then closes the ethnography by naming the position these participants occupy that American belonging has no category for, and by turning the dissertation's founding question to the participants themselves. Their accounts converge on a relational answer: home is not a fixed place but the presence of people who have witnessed enough of the participant's complexity to make performance unnecessary.

What *Home* demonstrates across both sections is the dissertation's thesis as lived ethnographic reality: that Afro-West Indian Americans use Caribbean popular music as a contact zone for transcultural identity construction, that what they construct is a pluralized self the existing categories cannot hold, and that home for a generation born in the United States and raised inside Caribbean households whose customs differed from the country around them lives not in any place but in the relations that recognize them whole.

Transcultural Permutations: New York Caribbean Identity

If *Redefining Belonging* tracked how Colette's detachment from the communal scale of CPM made the SMT framework's interdependence visible through rupture, *Transcultural Permutations* tracks the identity that forms when all three scales remain active and in concert. That identity—the New York Caribbean—is what Sandy, Shanice, and Jennifer describe, each from a different vantage point, and it's the empirical case through which the Pluralized Identity model's central claim about pluralized identity formation in diasporic settings becomes ethnographically visible.

The New York Caribbean isn't an inherited formation or an environmental effect; it's actively constructed by Afro-West Indian Americans through sustained CPM engagement in New York City's dense multi-island Caribbean geography. What this construction produces is the transcultural identity the dissertation has been theorizing since the Introduction—a hybridized self that holds insular difference and diasporic commonality together without collapsing into either a hyphenated compromise or a forced assimilation into the American racial monolith. What my participants demonstrate across the three arcs that follow is that this

construction is generative: they are proposing a self-description American racial discourse does not currently hold space for, and they are doing so by way of distinction from the default "African American" or "Black American" ascription—not to reject Blackness or Americanness but to name a formation the existing racial taxonomy cannot describe.

Limitless Pluralities: The Hybridity Spectrum

The three arcs that follow work through this formation from three angles. Synergy takes up the New York Caribbean as settled identity, tracking how it forms when the peripheral, intermediary, and immediate scales are operating together within a community dense enough to hold pan-Caribbean listening as its own shared repertoire—Sandy working the formation out in conversation, Shanice recognizing it as a name for what she already inhabits, Jennifer documenting what happens to it when her geography changes. The Caribbean vs. Black American arc follows the same formation into its political register, where three different self-descriptions—Shanice's single-term Caribbean, Jennifer's dual Black American and Jamaican, Teresa's hyphenated Caribbean American—each propose an alternative to the default "Black American" ascription by way of distinction from it, naming a formation American racial discourse does not currently hold space for. Severing Rhizomes takes the most complete displacement any of my participants describe—Colette's Maryland move at twelve—and tracks the labor that identity reconstruction demands when the intermediary-communal scale that held the formation ambiently is no longer in place.

Each arc surfaces a different configuration of the formation, and the multiplicity is the point: there is no single New York Caribbean self-description, no single right way to inhabit it, no

single scalar profile that produces the only authentic version. The plurality is constitutive. What the three arcs together demonstrate is that the New York Caribbean is a space of permutations—a pluralized identity in the PI model's anti-essentialist sense precisely because every viable configuration of scales produces a legitimate formulation of the same formation, and no formulation's legitimacy depends on the others' invalidity. Sandy's working-out, Shanice's recognition, Jennifer's reconstruction, Teresa's hyphenation, Colette's downshift, the brother's differentiator—these aren't variations around a correct original but instances of the formation itself, each limited only by what each participant's specific scalar configuration makes available.

Across the three, a single analytical argument accumulates: that the New York Caribbean is a pluralized identity actively constructed through CPM engagement across the three scalar registers, and that the differences in how my participants describe and defend it track directly to the specific scalar configurations their biographies have produced. The formation does not require a uniform scalar profile to remain legible; what it requires is sustained scalar activity, and when any of the three scales thins, the self-description adjusts to compensate. Where Redefining Belonging showed what SMT means when a scale is subtracted, Transcultural Permutations shows what the framework predicts when the scales hold together, and what Afro-West Indian Americans construct in that holding together.

Synergy: New York as Caribbean-American synthesis

Sandy worked out her account of the New York Caribbean mid-conversation, arriving at the formulation through the comparison she drew between the music that made her feel most

Belizean and the music that made her feel most like a New Yorker. Her account shows SMT's three scales operating in concert in a single body. Supa G travels along the peripheral scale as a canonical Belizean marker; the Brooklyn neighborhood's multi-island saturation does the communal-intermediary work of holding a broader CPM catalogue as shared repertoire; Sandy's own listening registers the two as distinct embodied identities—"particularly Belizean" when Supa G plays, "particularly New York" when the wider diasporic canon does. The synthesis she names at the close of the passage—the New York Caribbean as the identity that carries her American belonging—is what that scalar engagement has constructed across years of listening.

> **Sandy:** I think the first one that comes to mind is this Belizean artist, his name is Supa G. I don't know how long he's been around, but I feel like I've been listening to his music for a really long time. Him as an artist is what makes me feel most connected to Belize and Belizean culture. I think in New York there's a general Caribbean culture that is very unique to New York, right? I talk to other Black people who have moved to New York and they're always so shocked by how Caribbean this place is—whether they like it or not, that's their own preference, but Caribbean culture has saturated New York in a way that makes me feel like more of a New Yorker. Whereas when I listen to Supa G, for example, it makes me feel particularly Belizean in a way. And maybe every country and person from that country has that who grew up in New York, but I think New York, because it's so Caribbean—at least the way that I grew up, growing up in Brooklyn in particular, and having all these transplants move to Brooklyn and be shocked by how Caribbean it is—I feel like that larger diasporic music, especially from the 2000s–2010s, while it feels Caribbean, yes, it also feels particularly New York to me.
>
> **Holland:** Can you elaborate on that? I think that's an interesting point. My culture shock of leaving New York was like, "Oh, the Caribbean has left too." And just coming back and it's on the radio stations, it's in the culture, it's in the slang, it's in the food.
>
> **Sandy:** Yeah! It's literally in everything. And I don't know if it's New York particularly, or specifically Brooklyn, but you have Flatbush in Brooklyn, which is like little Caribbean, and that population—our population—is very large there, and that's where it's most concentrated. That doesn't account for all the other Caribbean people throughout Brooklyn. But I think that being Caribbean American in New York and in Brooklyn at that time feels like a part of my New York identity, rather than my Caribbean identity. One artist in particular—Sean Paul, for example. I don't know how big Sean Paul was outside of New York (both laugh). Maybe he has a few songs that most people in the U.S. know. "Temperature," of course, and some of those others. But I think there are some deep cuts that make me feel particularly like a New Yorker, and like a Brooklynite in particular. My fiancé is from the Bronx, and I don't think he feels particularly connected to Caribbean music in that way. His family's from Puerto Rico, so maybe that's slightly different. But I can only

> speak from the I perspective, which is that having that diasporic connection from the Caribbean and growing up in Brooklyn at that time doesn't necessarily make me feel more Caribbean, but certainly makes me feel more like a New Yorker.

I shared this concept with Shanice, who immediately affirmed it as reflecting her own experience.

> **Holland:** I was speaking to someone, and they mentioned that when they think about their identity, they don't think of themselves as Caribbean American. They think of themselves as New York Caribbean. Because that's what they feel like—they can't separate the two. Being from New York and being Caribbean is what makes their identity. There's not a parsing at that point.
> **Shanice:** Agreed. Yeah, agree.

Sandy sharpened the distinction further through a comparison with her Belize-raised cousins, whose Caribbean listening operates under a different scalar configuration.

> **Sandy:** I don't know. I feel like I'm just making this realization as I'm speaking to you.
> **Holland:** That's totally fine. It's not something you have to have all the answers to. Whatever helps you describe it, or whatever makes the most sense.
> **Sandy:** I think of my cousins, my mom's sister's kids. They grew up in Belize. They were born here but they grew up in Belize. They're very much into music, they listen to music all day, every day. They're girls who, opposite for me, need music all the time, and they're much younger than I am. The oldest is maybe seven years younger, which is a large enough difference. But I think about how I would listen to music, and I would still share music with her, especially with her being from the Caribbean, and we would share music as much as we could. I think I felt most like a part of the diaspora and like an immigrant to New York, because I would have this amalgamation of what I listen to as Caribbean music. But since she grew up in Belize, she is less focused on this larger amalgamation and more on the music that comes from Belize. And yes, the Caribbean is small, and the genre isn't very wide or large, and she would still listen to music from other countries and things like that, certainly more up to date than we were. But I guess maybe that's the distinction—as a New Yorker, you think of all Caribbean music as your own, and the combination of all music from all countries as one genre maybe feels to me more like a New Yorker than thinking about my cousin who grew up in Belize and was more focused on Belizean music. Does that make sense?

The cousin comparison isolates the intermediary scale as the variable doing the work. Sandy's cousin has the immediate scale (her own listening) and the peripheral scale (global CPM, more current than Sandy's); what differs is the intermediary-communal scale, which in Belize is calibrated country-first rather than pan-Caribbean. The cousin's community holds

Belizean music as the native unit of cultural belonging; Sandy's Brooklyn community holds the regional amalgamation that way. Neither engagement is more or less Caribbean—both are scalar configurations producing different diasporic identities. Her cousins produce a Belizean-raised-in-Belize identity in which "Caribbean" names a region to which one's country belongs; Sandy's produces a New York Caribbean identity in which "Caribbean" names the native unit itself. What Sandy is documenting in real time is the PI model's claim made lived: she isn't describing an identity she inherited but one CPM has been actively constructing for her through years of engagement in the Brooklyn intermediary scale.

> **Holland:** You're mentioning this New York identity, the Caribbean cultural identity, and I'm guessing there's also an American identity mixed in. Have you experienced any difficulties navigating between them?
> **Sandy:** No, not particularly, because I think this New York Caribbean identity is my American identity. The other identity, I think, is my family and my Belizean identity.
> **Holland:** So one's familial and one's a personal one?
> **Sandy:** Yeah. I think about my mom. She grew up in Belize and immigrated here. I think she would count a lot of the larger Caribbean diaspora as maybe more American.
> **Holland:** That's interesting.
> **Sandy:** Yeah. And it could also be because the setting we're in is America. But I think this is my American identity. I mean, I guess I have my identity that's like my assimilation identity—which is just me navigating white spaces and having to know a Taylor Swift song here and there, or my NSYNC album.

What Sandy arrives at here is the PI model's both/and logic articulated in her own vocabulary. Three functionally distinct identities operate at once: the New York Caribbean carrying her American belonging; the Belizean holding her family and interior life; the assimilation identity she deploys strategically in white spaces. None of these collapses into another, and none reads as a fragmented compromise. They are three configurations of the same pluralized self, each sustained by a different scalar setup. The New York Caribbean requires all

three SMT scales in concert. The Belizean relies on the peripheral-immediate axis—Supa G, specific canonical markers—mediated through the smaller intermediary scale of her Belizean family. The assimilation identity operates outside CPM entirely, in spaces where the music isn't doing the cultural work, which is why the one identity that requires active labor to sustain is the one CPM does not construct. The ordinary diasporic framing—Caribbean and American in ongoing negotiation—does not surface in Sandy's account because the Brooklyn neighborhood had already held the two together through CPM-mediated intermediary activity for years before she was asked to negotiate them consciously.

Shanice, for whom the same scalar configuration produced the same formation, confirmed it in four turns.

> **Holland:** I actually was speaking to someone, and they were mentioning that when they think about their identity, they don't think of themselves as Caribbean American. They think of themselves as New York Caribbean. Because—
> **Shanice:** Agree! I have, yeah, mhmm...
> **Holland:** That's what they feel like. Like, "I can't separate the two. Being from New York and being Caribbean is what makes my identity." There's not a parsing at that point—that's just it.
> **Shanice:** Agreed. Yeah, agree.

The brevity is the point. Shanice's scales are all active and concordant, which means the formation presents itself to her as a name for what she already inhabits rather than as a concept she has to work out. This is how the PI model's imaginative dimension behaves when it's fully operational: the pluralized identity does not appear as a problem to be solved but as a settled state language catches up with. Jennifer, asked the same question from California, responded from a different scalar position.

> **Holland:** Someone brought up that they see themselves as New York Caribbean, because they can't see their American identity without the Caribbean parts of it. In New York, because Caribbean culture is so ingrained, there's not that same questioning of "Am I Black

enough for this space?" Outside of New York, you have to keep questioning that because Southern Black serves as the poster child of what Black is in America. But in New York, that's not the case because Caribbean culture is so mixed in. Does that resonate for you, or is there a nuance or difference?

Jennifer: Love this! Growing up, I felt like a New York Caribbean—100 percent. I think moving to California, I've felt more American Black, because there's less of that—New York is so ingrained with Caribbean culture, it's everywhere, even beyond Jamaican. Every other person you knew was Grenadian and Bajan. Here, there's not necessarily that same diversity. So I feel much more like a Black American here, because I have to try harder to attach to my Jamaican culture.

Holland: So how you identify right now would probably be more Black American, versus when you were younger, you might say more New York Caribbean.

Jennifer: I think before I would say "New York Caribbean," and now I would say "New York. Caribbean." They feel separate, as opposed to before when they informed each other and went hand in hand.

Holland: Even with this rediscovery of your culture, it's still not as significant a piece as the Black American part for you right now.

Jennifer: Exactly! Because it feels like something I have to go out of my way to do or perform or find community in. It feels like a Duolingo thing—you have to go learn the language. I have to decide I'm making Caribbean food, therefore I have to decide I'm going to a Caribbean market. Whereas in New York, every market was holding the things, you're hearing the music. So I feel like I have to go to the space. Therefore it's not something I always think about. I probably identify as Black American with more ease than I identify as Caribbean. But I'll be telling everybody I'm Jamaican. (She laughs)

Jennifer's account tracks what happens when the scalar configuration that constructed the New York Caribbean changes. Her peripheral scale still works—CPM remains accessible in California. Her immediate scale is still the same body doing the same recognition. The intermediary scale is what California does not supply: "Every other person you knew was Grenadan and Bajan" in New York; in California, the multi-island density isn't there. The peripheral canon arrives without the communal recognition that held it as Caribbean-generally, and without the ambient co-presence that produced the New York Caribbean synthesis in the first place. Her self-description tracks the shift precisely: "New York Caribbean," the formation of all three scales constructed together, becomes "New York period, Caribbean period," what the peripheral and immediate scales can hold when the intermediary is no longer doing the

mediation work. The labor the community had been performing ambiently now falls to Jennifer herself, and she names it "Duolingo"—the deliberate daily practice of reaching for what used to arrive without effort. The identity has not disappeared; it has become a reconstruction project.

Sandy, Shanice, and Jennifer together demonstrate the PI model's central claim as lived ethnographic reality. Sandy shows the formation in progress, Shanice shows it settled, Jennifer shows it persisting through reconstruction. None of them is inheriting a Caribbean identity independent of her active scalar engagement, and none is being environmentally stamped by the neighborhood. They are constructing, and what they construct is the pluralized hybridity the dissertation has been theorizing—Caribbean and American and New York held together as one identity rather than alternating among three. The next arc shows this same construction doing political work.

Caribbean vs. Black American identity: the New York distinction

American racial discourse operates on a set of categories—"African American," "Black American," "Black"—none of which name the Afro-Caribbean American formation my participants actually inhabit. What Shanice, Jennifer, and Teresa describe in their self-identifications are three propositions of an alternative that the existing racial taxonomy does not hold space for, each arrived at by way of distinction from the default "Black American" ascription but each oriented toward naming a formation rather than rejecting one. Shanice proposes "Caribbean" as her primary self-description and lets her body and her New York context carry the Blackness and Americanness she does not state.

Jennifer proposes a dual allocation—"Black American and Jamaican specifically—that names two cultural registers her body holds simultaneously, neither of which the monolithic "Black American" label could describe on its own. Teresa proposes "Caribbean American"—the hyphenated compound—insisting that the Americanness her scalar configuration produced be named alongside the Caribbean half, so that neither half dissolves into the other. What the three self-descriptions have in common isn't the rejection of Blackness or Americanness but the naming of an Afro-Caribbean American formation the existing racial categories cannot describe. The distinction from Black American ascription is the vehicle through which each proposition becomes legible.

> **Holland:** You were talking last time about cultural legitimacy and feeling like you can't fully claim the Caribbean identity, but you also still relate to it, and there's some distance between the two. Do you want to pick up from there?
> **Shanice:** Yeah, sure. I don't think it's that I can't claim it. I think it's like you're made to feel like you shouldn't—you can't claim it all the way, by society and by people closer to you. Because I think the first basis is not living there. But then I feel like you move through that a lot easier when you know that—I think I had that for a second a couple years ago, especially as I was getting deeper into my own research. But then you remember: if your parents could stay there, they would. So once you get through that, it's not that you don't claim it. But then there are the other pieces of feeling—whether it's certain languages, whether it's certain...And then definitely with the queer identity, feeling like, "oh, maybe there is a potential that you'd want to come back," but then what would that actually look like? And that kind of dampens what you're feeling. So again, I think it was something I never really questioned about myself, even coming into my queerness—I never questioned that I wasn't Caribbean. But when it's put together with not growing up there, there's certain levels of ambivalence—not towards your Caribbeanness, but towards how you establish that true linkage.
> **Shanice:** Yeah, I feel like when people ask me, I'm Caribbean—that's just my experience. So when someone's asking me, I'm like, "oh, I'm Caribbean," because that's how I feel. And you don't have to guess that I'm Black. So obviously, I'm Black and Caribbean. When it comes to other terms, I'm just from New York. But again, New York is in America, but you don't always say "I'm Black American" in the same way. And maybe it's also because I'm in community with people who are African American—from the South and the Midwest—who have different experiences. But it's not in a way where I'm afraid of being called African American. If someone calls me that, I'm not going to be like, "I'm Caribbean," or correct them. But I think in terms of how I self-identify, that's the most comfortable for me, because it's the same experience but also a different experience—not in a hierarchical way, just

different.

Shanice's self-description holds together because her scalar configuration is complete: all three scales active and concordant, which means Blackness reads off her body silently at the immediate scale ("you don't have to guess") and the New York intermediary scale silently carries the American specification underneath her self-identification as Caribbean. The move isn't a rejection of "African American" as a term that could be applied to her—"If someone calls me that, I'm not going to be like, 'I'm Caribbean,' or correct them"—but a proposition of "Caribbean" as the self-description that most accurately names where her actual cultural formation took place.

The Black Americans she is in community with are from the South and the Midwest, and their cultural practice—the food, the music, the accent, the relationship to Christianity, the relationship to the civil rights movement—isn't her cultural practice. Hers is Caribbean. What "Caribbean" makes available is a distinction of cultural formation without a hierarchy between the two, "not in a hierarchical way, just different," and that distinction is what carves space for the single term to function as self-description in an American context where it would otherwise be subsumed.

> **Holland:** I actually relate to that more than my Black American identity too. My dad's side of the family is African American, very much DMV, Appalachian region. And there are just so many distinct cultural differences between the two where I can't commit to this as much as I do the other. Not because of any hierarchy, just because it's not my experience culturally, food-wise, accent-wise.
> **Shanice:** Exactly. And I think that's where the New York culture comes in—my alignment with Black American culture is New York culture. And there's a certain aspect that doesn't need to be understood, because a lot of people from New York culture have a similar experience, even across the Caribbean diaspora. You're Puerto Rican, or you're Dominican, or whatever. You're born in America, but you're not necessarily calling yourself Hispanic American or Latino—it's not the same thing. You'll just be like, "oh, I'm Puerto Rican."
> **Holland:** Caribbean culture is kind of imbued into New York culture, especially Black culture in New York. Yes, there's the Black American element, but even within that, it's very much shaped and defined by the Caribbean in a way you can't get in other cities.

Shanice: I agree with that.

The structural dependency Shanice names—"my alignment with Black American culture is New York culture"—is why her single-term self-description works as a proposition rather than a rejection. Her self-identification as Caribbean isn't a denial of Blackness but a more precise specification that her New York intermediary scale already supplies silently. Caribbeanness becomes the anchor because it's the specification the existing racial taxonomy erases; New York becomes the silent bridge because the intermediary community has been doing the cultural work of holding Caribbean and American together in her environment for her whole life. Take New York away, as Jennifer's move did, and the silent bridge has to be spelled out explicitly, and the self-description changes.

When asked about cultural heritage from her California vantage point, Jennifer produced a dual claim that does exactly that spelling-out work.

> **Holland:** What parts of your cultural heritage do you most identify with?
> **Jennifer:** Black American and Jamaican specifically—Caribbean as a whole, I guess. But because I've been to Jamaica a lot, especially in my adolescence—I'm more removed from being like a direct "I grew up in Jamaica." So I identify with Jamaican culture and Black American culture…Black American culture has shaped my vernacular, most of my experience. Jamaican culture has shaped my worldliness—a lot of my family speaks in patwa, the food we cook. I went to Jamaica a lot when I was younger, and a lot of my strictly Black American friends don't have experience of going out of the country when we were young. So I think that did something to me, something good. But Black Americanness is my touchstone, because it's what I grew up mostly ingesting from my peers. And a specific—because we're not Southern, so it's a very New York Black.

Her dual self-description divides cultural labor across two terms in a way Shanice's single-term formulation does not need to. Black American names the register her vernacular and everyday experience inhabit—the intermediary work her New York community did in shaping how she talks, moves, and codes socially. Jamaican names the register her family and worldliness inhabit,

the cultural content transmitted through domestic and extended-family channels and reinforced by childhood trips to Jamaica. In New York, both registers operated through a single saturated intermediary scale, which is why, as Synergy documented, Jennifer could earlier describe herself simply as New York Caribbean. In California, the intermediary has thinned, and the two registers require separate naming—neither of which would be adequately named by "Black American" alone.

Idioms & Culture-Dependent Phrasing

Teresa's account arrives at the same insistence on specification through a third configuration. The Saint Ann's years discussed in Chapter 1's *Something Taken*, disrupted her intermediary scale through the adolescent period when the New York Caribbean synthesis Sandy and Shanice describe would typically be under construction. Her account of Atlanta, where she and I spoke about her early undergraduate years at Georgia Tech, documents the specific cost.

> **Holland:** You said I need a translator.
> **Teresa:** Yeah. Like, when II first got to Atlanta, my roommate acted as a translator. There were moments that I genuinely would be in a circle of Black people talking, and I'd have to turn to her and be like, "what are we talking about?" And she'd go, "Oh, this person just said this. This person just said this." And I'm like, "That is not what they said." Like you guys are not enunciating your words! Fuck. So that makes me feel, huh?
> **Holland:** I was gonna say, I think it's because with the West Indian identities especially, there's a lot of accent on enunciation. There may be an accent too but there's still the enunciation. If they're going into patois or something, then you're going to probably lose some of that. But typically, if it's standard English, it's going to be enunciated.
> **Teresa:** Bro! And why can I understand patois, but I can't understand these people in Atlanta? Like, I literally was like, that doesn't even make any sense. And that showed me that it's just being used to it, being grown up in it. It just becomes a second language to you. Now, I go to my boyfriend's family house and I can understand what everybody is saying. When I first started dating him, I was like, "Babe. Your grandma just talks and I just have to smile and nod, because I don't know what she's saying to me." And that I find to be insane because she's speaking English.
> **Holland:** Just not in a way that you can understand.
> **Teresa:** I just don't understand. And so in moments like that, I feel particularly kind of like white. Like I kind of feel like Saint Ann's stole something from me.

Holland: It's like you feel that otheredness.
Teresa: Othered. But then my little sister, she's 16. She went to PWIs her whole life. She went to Grace Church until eighth grade, and now she goes to boarding school. When we are next to each other, you can hear in her voice how "white" she is, and hearing my voice and how hood I am. Like I use slang words or I say "fronting," or I say "I'm gonna" instead of "I'm going to." Kira says "I'm going to." "I would like to." She uses every single word. So then in moments like that, I feel particularly Black. Like, "oh, dang. At least I didn't lose all of it."

Teresa's position flickers depending on which intermediary configuration she stands inside. In Atlanta, Saint Ann's Brooklyn-PWI enunciation reads as "particularly kind of like white." Next to her PWI-from-preschool sister, her Caribbean-home-inflected speech reads as "particularly Black." What Saint Ann's stole was the fluency that would have let Teresa sit continuously inside Black American communal spaces without needing a translator; what it did not steal was her Caribbean-inflected speech or her bodily legibility as Black. The flicker is structural: her intermediary scale was too PWI-mediated in adolescence for the silent synthesis Sandy, Shanice, and Brooklyn-era Jennifer describe, but not so mediated that her Caribbean home-life disappeared from her register.

Holland: That actually makes sense. Within a diaspora, there are always cultural markers specific to particular regions, even though it's all the same diaspora. So it sounds like you're constantly navigating that balance—the Southern Black Americanness with its drawl and enunciation, the Caribbean West Indian register, the island-born Caribbean you'd encounter if you went back to Saint Lucia—and the othering you're experiencing is taking a different form as you move between them.
Teresa: Yeah. Like I have to accept that I am uniquely myself. Like I can't sit here and be like, oh, I want to be as Caribbean as my dad. He was born and raised there. Or, I want to be as Black as my boyfriend. He was born and raised in Georgia. There's no way for me to pick up a Black card and be like, "Oh, this is mine now." I didn't experience that. I just feel like we're all uniquely ourselves, whether you feel othered in some places or accepted in other places.
Holland: I want to follow that for just a second. You're saying you're a Caribbean kid, but you're noticing the distinctions—your dad, born in St. Lucia, that's Black Caribbean. Your boyfriend, born in Georgia, Black American. So how do you identify yourself? Where do you see yourself in this kind of dichotomy?
Teresa: So, like, I'm not Caribbean, I'm Caribbean American.
Holland: What does that mean to you?

> **Teresa:** Like, I have to acknowledge the Americanness there. I'm not just the Caribbean kid because I don't have the growing up in the Caribbean [experience], or doing specific things, or having the accent per se. But I know that I have that Caribbean background because of how I was raised, certain ideologies I have. Your parents shape you. So I'm Caribbean but American because when I went to Saint Ann's, I'm trying to fit in. When I went to Georgia Tech, I'm trying to fit in. I have to acknowledge that there's the Caribbean side of me and the fact that that will never leave. I love my oxtail and my rice and peas and my black cake and my roti, and I will pick that over any food, any day. I will pick Calypso and Soca at a party over any fucking music any fucking day. But I have to acknowledge that I like my little Dunkin Donuts. I love singing some Taylor Swift. Justin Bieber slaps. I'm studying American architecture. It's not like I did architecture school and went back to the Caribbean and I'm doing Caribbean architecture. I'm doing American stuff. We grew up here. I'm American. I was born here. I don't want to claim it too hard because I don't feel patriotic, but we still here.

Her "Caribbean American" is the self-description a PWI-mediated adolescence makes available. The hyphen is load-bearing: it names both halves explicitly because her scalar configuration did not allow either to hold the other silently. When I asked her later about the specific cultural content she identified with most, the answer made the structure of the hyphen visible.

> **Teresa:** The Caribbeanness. It's the food and...I guess the overall culture of carefreeness. Carnival. Caribbean is very work hard, play hard. Every Caribbean person I know is a very hard worker, very in tune with what they want to do with their lives and where they want to be, but they'll party with you, and they'll party hard. They'll have that cookout in their backyard and invite everybody over. I feel like that is just very culturally like—
> **Holland:** Like communal.
> **Teresa:** Communal, yes, yes. That's what it is. My communalness is my Caribbeanness. My individualism, where I'm like, Nah, I don't want people in my house right now, or I want to do this for myself, or I don't want to have to cook a meal for everybody. That's my very American side. And then Blackness is the experience. Regardless of whether you're African American, I'm Black American, you're Caribbean American, whatever, or you're just African. The people who own this country and who are biased against us do not ask you, are you African or are you Jamaican? Oh, you're African, I'm gonna treat you better than the Jamaican. They're not asking that. They're just seeing your skin tone and deciding that you're Black and deciding how to treat you based off of that. So I feel like Blackness is a shared experience throughout the diaspora, whereas the Caribbean is the shared experience of communalness and community and food and music, and then the American side is the...because I don't think America has culture.

Teresa's analysis precisely partitions the terms. Caribbeanness holds the communal content—the food, the carefreeness, the cookout-in-the-backyard sociality. Americanness holds

the individualist counterweight she does not want to overclaim but cannot disown. Blackness holds neither, because Blackness does not operate at the scale of cultural formation; it operates as a shared experience of racialization. The three terms are structurally different work, which is why her self-description requires all three named separately rather than collapsed into any single one. The sister comparison Teresa draws in the same conversation makes the stakes of the partition visible.

> **Holland:** It's like a collectivist mentality versus the individualist mentality. There's a lot of historical implications—thinking about perceptions of Black bodies, perceptions of Black people, the history of slavery, especially in the Caribbean, this idea that there has to be some sort of communal get-together to push back against an oppressor. For myself, when I'm really having a troubling time just dealing with American culture—honestly, just Americans in general—it's because I feel like there's this constant, overarching, almost suffocating presence of individualism. The fact that you can't seem to recognize that being part of a collective is also to a benefit—you can be an individual in a collective. Just because someone is willing to give does not mean that they're a pushover or they're weak. You recognize the benefit of collectivism, the fact that we get more done together than we do by ourselves.
> **Teresa:** You're preaching.
> **Holland:** A shared responsibility kind of mentality. You give back. You get and you give. That's why I can't stand most people—I can't with the individualism. My friends are my friends because we can all recognize the give and take dynamic, where if you need it, I can give it. If I need it, you can give.
> **Teresa:** Yes! friendship is a burden. I literally had this conversation with my little sister, because—another problem with the younger Gen Z is—I don't think that they're making, like, real connections. Like, if I ask my sister, "Oh, what is your friend doing for Christmas?" She can't tell me. She's just like, "Oh, I don't know. They said they were going home or something." And I'm like, I remember in high school you and I sitting down and being like, "Hey, what you doing for Christmas?" Like, I don't know why you wouldn't ask that question of your friend. And she's just like, "No, because you don't want to be annoying. You don't want to like, keep asking them questions, blah blah blah." And I was like, "Kira, friendship is a burden. Literally being friends with someone is choosing to burden them. Like, I'm going to text you all the time or I'm going to pop up on you, or I'm going to consistently ask you about that guy that you were interested in two weeks ago because I saw him with another girl last week. Like, it's the burden of knowing something about somebody, knowing that you have to give to somebody, and knowing that you have to take from somebody. And if your friend can't equally give and take then that's not necessarily, in my opinion, a friend."
> **Holland:** That tracks, especially with the generational difference—and the pandemic plays a part in that too. But what strikes me is that you and your sister are both Caribbean American on paper, and your experiences of it are radically different.

Teresa: Yeah, that girl's American.
Holland: I wonder if that's because, for you, a lot of this was shaped by your grandmother—and I'm guessing that your sister didn't have her as much, so she maybe didn't have that direct connection in the same way.
Teresa: Yeah, I think for me, it was my mom's mom because technically, my mom is the first generation American but she was in Trinidad for 16 years. So I consider my mom to also be Caribbean American, whereas I consider my grandmother to be Caribbean and I consider my dad to be Caribbean. Kira, on the other hand, has our Caribbean American mom and a Caribbean American father. So I feel like she—and, for example, I think that my kids will just be Americans. I think that she is just an American. She has sprinkles of Caribbean in there, the values and the ideas and stuff like that. But I know for a fact my sister could not tell you a Caribbean song.
Holland: So she doesn't have the cultural connections in the same way.
Teresa: It's not the same whatsoever.
Holland: So for you, the Caribbean American comes from the investment in and connection to the culture versus simply the lineage.
Teresa: Yeah, like it might be in your blood—my sister can identify as Caribbean American—but if you were asking me to describe her and what she is the most, I would say that she's just an American kid. And, if anything, I would say she's kind of missing culture a little bit because she doesn't have that Caribbean essence, like she's not…She'll go buy a roti but that's probably like once every six months—whereas I need a roti like every month.

Her refusal to describe her sister as most-fundamentally Caribbean American, despite identical lineage, is the PI model's anti-essentialist claim in Teresa's own vocabulary. Caribbean American identifies what one is only when the cultural formation has actually happened—the communal investment, the give-and-take, the roti every month rather than every six months, the ability to name a Caribbean song. Lineage does not substitute for formation, and the distinction between her and Reagan tracks the presence or absence of the intermediary scale doing its cultural work across the full arc of childhood. The sister comparison also makes something else visible that Teresa's earlier self-description had only implied: the hyphenated compound is legible precisely because the participant can hear the difference between holding both halves in formation and holding only one.

Across Shanice, Jennifer, and Teresa, the same formation proposes itself in three self-descriptions, each calibrated to a specific scalar configuration and each working by way of

distinction from the default “Black American” ascription. Shanice’s single term works because her body and her New York context silently specify the Blackness and Americanness the word does not state. Jennifer’s dual term works because California has thinned the intermediary scale and the two registers need separate naming. Teresa’s hyphenated compound works because PWI mediation in adolescence prevented the silent synthesis, and both halves of her formation require explicit acknowledgment for either to hold. The three aren't competing self-descriptions; they are instances of the same formation surfacing in the specific variant each participant’s biography makes available.

Severing Rhizomes: Displacement from the New York Caribbean

The New York Caribbean’s intermediary-communal scale did not simply thin in Colette’s account of Maryland; it was fully severed. Where *Redefining Belonging* examined the rupture itself—the Mark Twain-era disorientation documented in Chapter 1—this segment follows what the rupture made necessary. Two specific patterns surface in Colette’s account: the divergent strategies Colette and their brother developed for carrying Jamaican identity forward after Brooklyn, and the thinning of family functions from a rhizomatic multi-directional network of Caribbean musical knowledge into a period-locked broadcast from aging relatives. Read together, they show that the New York Caribbean had always been a construction, legible as such because what the siblings had to do after Maryland was construct it again under harder conditions.

> **Holland:** I know you have siblings. So did that at all change the dynamic, or the atmosphere of what was played or what you were listening to?
> **Colette:** I think this is probably later in age, but my sister is much, much younger, but my brother's a little bit over a year younger than me. Because we're closer in age, we can speak to that more. He always had his finger on the pulse of music—like songs that were hits—

that I had missed, or certain genres I hadn't paid attention to. Particularly when it came to hip-hop and rap, he was more on top of that kind of music. And also, this must have been middle school or early high school, when he would hang out with my cousins and stuff. I realized, “Oh, he knows some of these Caribbean songs that I don't know. He was much more on top of it.” And so that's when I started to seek out more of that music because I think he had more actively sought it out. When [we] moved from New York to Maryland, I think he had a desire to hold on to much more of his Jamaican identity, and kind of like define that for himself. So I think he sought out some more of the music, and just had more of that connection. That kind of triggered me to be like, “Oh yeah, I do love those songs,” and then go and look them up myself. Because I'm like, why do my cousin and my brother know the lyrics to this song? I like the song too.

Holland: So he's more like the active music connoisseur and that kind of spurred you on to have more interest in it and actively looking at it yourself.

Colette: Yeah, like for those songs. It's very easy for me to go through phases and forget about stuff. So I think for a while I was just listening to whatever it was that I listened to. And I think our tastes were also somewhat different. But yeah, when it came to certain types of music that I wasn't listening to, I could look to him as kind of a check of, oh, what am I missing? And that ended up being one of the things that I was missing was Caribbean popular music.

Holland: Maybe give me an example of your music taste compared to his, since you mentioned they’re slightly different.

Colette: Yeah. He is much more likely to be listening to Playboi Carti, Gunna—More hip-hop that is on the pulse of modern hip-hop than I am. He'll send me stuff, and it's 50-50: half the time it's, “Oh, this isn't really doing anything for me.” And then sometimes it’s like, “Oh wait, this is really good, thanks for putting me on.” His music taste is also very diverse but I think in many other ways, we're aligned. Like, I'm not on top of rap to the point where like, if you put NBA, YoungBoy, and NLE Choppa in a room and asked me to identify who was who, I'd be like, all right, these are both acronyms and names of rappers that I recognize but I can't pick them apart or tell you what their music sounds like.

Holland: I mean, you're a step further than me because I don't know who these people are.

Colette: Okay, right? Whereas my brother and my sister would both be able to.

Holland: Maybe a slight generational shift because you're a true millennial and I'm guessing your brother might be in that crossroads, and then your sister is a true Gen Z.

Colette: Yes, I think so. Even though my brother is a '96 baby.

Holland: So like being omnivorous, just taking in anything that caught your attention.

Colette: Absolutely, absolutely. A lot of it was whatever was around me, in whatever I could tap into, wherever I was in Maryland, and then what I could remember from when I was in New York.

Holland: Or whatever your brother put you on to, or maybe something you heard at a function with your family and cousins.

Colette: Yeah. I don't know if it was necessarily whatever I heard at a function. I don't think that we were necessarily able to go to family functions in the same way that we used to once we moved here. Occasionally—like that summer vacation where I was like, “Oh my gosh, how does my cousin and my brother know this song and I don't?” That must have been mid-to-late high school. So yeah, occasionally, we were still seeing family and kind of hearing things that I wasn't necessarily playing for myself but I think also because of the age group that was putting on these functions, it was the same music I had always heard

> earlier from earlier in my life. It wasn't like my aunts and uncles were necessarily tapped into whatever Caribbean music had dropped that year. They were more so playing older stuff that I pretty much already heard. And so I think at that age or in college, for instance, if I heard something more recent, like within the past five years, when it came to Caribbean music, it's because I went on YouTube and found compilations, or had looked up, okay, what has dropped recently. But aside from that, whatever was playing at family functions wasn't necessarily stuff that I was like, oh, let me go and add this to my iPod.

Family functions in Brooklyn were a node in a rhizomatic network—connected sideways to the block, the cousins' networks, the neighborhood's circulation of what had dropped that week—and that lateral connectivity is what let them keep transmitting current material across generations. Once the network reduces to annual summer visits and aging relatives playing the catalogues they grew up with, the gatherings become a period-locked broadcast: a one-directional channel carrying older material rather than a node through which current material flowed. YouTube compilations become the substitute. What Colette describes here is what happens to the peripheral scale when it's no longer being delivered by the intermediary: the music keeps arriving, but through a pipe that requires active seeking rather than ambient reception. Jennifer named this "Duolingo" labor in California; Colette documents it from a different vantage point—not the maintenance of an identity already constructed but the reconstruction of one whose scalar supports have been cut.

> **Holland:** I remember I saw in one of your responses in the [participant] form that your music taste between then and now has stayed pretty much the same. You also mentioned the term "Jamaican American twice removed." Elaborate on that a little bit more.
> **Colette:** Yeah, I came up with that on the spot because I was like, how do I really describe how I view my identity as Jamaican American? There's several layers to it and [me and my siblings] actually had a discussion about this at Thanksgiving dinner with [our] family because it's complicated. Even though [my parents] both immigrated from Jamaica, either as kids or teenagers, and the same is the case for my aunts and uncles—they came over as young people. When you're in Jamaica, you're supposed to speak the Queen's English, they already have that mindset. My grandmother was a teacher in Jamaica, so there's also that. Then they come to the US and kids are making fun of them for their accents and for speaking patwa. So they had to assimilate. I did not grow up hearing patwa or any type of really Jamaican accent or Jamaican English spoken in the home. It's really only when my mom

> speaks to her sisters, it comes out. When my dad speaks to someone else Jamaican, it comes out. My grandma, she can't hide it. She lived there most of her life.

Colette's "Jamaican American twice removed" names a specific scalar location. The peripheral scale reached the household filtered through a generation that had already done the assimilation labor and had strategic reasons not to transmit patois, accent, or explicit Caribbean markers in daily domestic life. What the Brooklyn neighborhood intermediary scale had been doing for Colette in childhood was compensating—filling in from the communal side what the household assimilation had not supplied from the domestic side. Once Maryland subtracted the intermediary compensation, the gaps the twice-removed household had always carried became structurally visible. The testing that followed was specifically about those gaps.

> **Holland:** It almost sounds like something similar happened for you moved around twelve to Maryland, and in that process there was some disconnect from the cultural heritage and steeping you had in New York. You were young enough to make the transition but still aware of the distinctions and differences—it was a lot to process and isolating to a degree.
> **Colette:** Yeah, yeah. Let me take that to family therapy. That's a good point.
> **Holland:** Your grandmother came as a full adult, so it's harder to make that switch. You're younger, you have the pliability—you're able to adapt more easily because you don't have those built-in associations to back you up.
> **Colette:** No, I think that's 100 percent correct.

The parallel Colette affirms—her own Maryland move at twelve as a scaled-down version of her grandmother's mid-adulthood immigration—names what SMT would predict as an age-calibrated disruption curve. The grandmother carried Jamaican cultural knowledge forward intact because she arrived with a fully constructed Caribbean identity and had no incentive or capacity to assimilate it away; Colette's parents, arriving as children and teenagers, did the assimilation work their school environment demanded because childhood pliability made that work available; Colette, arriving in Maryland at twelve, was young enough to adapt to the suburban environment but old enough to register the loss of what Brooklyn had been supplying.

What each generation's rupture shares is the structural fact of displacement from a known scalar configuration into an unfamiliar one. What they differ on is the age-calibrated degree to which adaptation was available. Colette's affirmation of the parallel places her own scalar disruption inside a longer family lineage of transcultural adaptation, each generation's work differently constrained by when in the life course the rupture arrived.

> **Colette:** It's interesting because, you know, my brother, I think, is much more confident. I think when we moved to Maryland, he used his Jamaicanness kind of as a differentiator for himself, and has been very proud of that. One of his social media handles is like Jamaican something something something. When you're in a place where it's hard to find other people who share that experience with you, yeah, it makes you stand out. And I know it's something that he's proud of, but he also grew up having the same experience as me. If anything, he got a year and a half less of it. I think he feels much more comfortable putting that aspect of his identity at the forefront than I do, and maybe it's because I know that I've been challenged more by people, and I don't like being tested.

Their brother's post-move response foregrounds the Jamaican marker. He seeks out Caribbean music his earlier exposure left uneven, puts "Jamaican" in his social media handles, and claims the identifier publicly because the Maryland suburbs supply no communal peer group to confirm it ambiently the way Brooklyn did. Jamaicanness becomes a differentiator—something usable in a social environment where no intermediary scale is producing it silently. Colette's response runs the opposite direction. For Colette, the same subtraction produces a distancing from explicit claims—not because Jamaicanness matters less, but because without the community behind every claim, every claim becomes exposed to testing Colette has already experienced as punishing. Both siblings are reconstructing. Their brother reconstructs against the absence of confirmation while Colette reconstructs against the presence of testing.

> **Holland:** Like a litmus test every time you have a conversation.
> **Colette:** A litmus test, yeah. And I think I try to distinguish between, oh, I'm Jamaican, versus like, I have Jamaican heritage. People at work will be like, oh, she's Jamaican, she's Jamaican, and I'm like, okay, okay, slow down because you're going to get me in trouble. Because

> people are going to be like, oh, you're Jamaican, and then have all these expectations. To say, “Oh, I have Jamaican heritage,” I think lowers other people's expectations a little bit, and allows me to have a little bit more control over what I want to share with other people. When it comes to aspects of my Jamaicanness that I deem important or elements I want to share, or that I'm not worried about coming under attack. Music is one of those things. Like one of my coworkers one time pulled up the song and I was like, oh, yeah, I think it was something I had heard but maybe I didn't know who it was. He was like, you don't know this artist? And I was like, no, I don't.
> **Holland:** It's like you're an encyclopedia of music.
> **Colette:** Yeah, exactly. I really need to catch up. I don't necessarily listen to a lot of Jamaican music. Because what people also don't recognize is that there are many sub-genres of Jamaican music. I think of it in the same way as, I'm not going to say, “Oh, I like all American music.” That's impossible. So for you to be like, “Oh, you're Jamaican, how do you not know this artist?” It's like, well no, I can also have differing tastes. Even though there are types of Jamaican music I like, there can also be other types that I'm not aware of, don't like, or don't listen to. We don't even have space for that nuance in the conversation. Because it's automatically like, you're Jamaican. How could you not?

The distinction between “I’m Jamaican” and “I have Jamaican heritage” is the self-description of someone managing Brooklyn-era social expectations inside a Maryland-era scalar reality. In Brooklyn, “I’m Jamaican” could have been said lightly because the communal intermediary diffused expectations across a wide field of participants whose shared recognition would have met any single interlocutor’s testing across the group’s collective fluency.

Post-severance, the same utterance concentrates all of those expectations on Colette individually. “I have Jamaican heritage” downshifts the claim by distinguishing lineage from cultural fluency, and that distinction returns to Colette a measure of control over which Jamaican elements to claim in which contexts. The downshift carries a cost—it registers the loss of the fluency Brooklyn would have built—but it also does analytical work: it names a position the essentialist logic—lineage equals fluency equals identity—cannot describe. Caribbean identity is constructed through sustained engagement. Cultural knowledge is specific rather than comprehensive. Individual agency over which elements to claim is itself part of what participant identity-construction consists of.

Holland: I think that also speaks to something you brought up earlier when you were talking about the music taste and the consumption, and the fact that your brother was one who was more actively going out and seeking out the music. Maybe making more active ways to find more connections or deeper connections to your Jamaican heritage and culture in a way that you weren't maybe as compelled to do.
Colette: Yeah, I think it came later. At some point, in late high school, in college, is when I really started to catch up and say, "Oh, these are the songs that I enjoyed growing up." It takes me to a different place. It allows me to tap into a different aspect of myself. When I started listening to Gyptian, like "Hold You," "Wine Slow." That's when I was very much coming into myself as more of a sexual being and I was able to connect to that, partially because this music allowed me to connect to that more. Or like when I listen to other songs, it does make me feel like I'm more connected to that aspect of my identity that I can't get to very easily through any other means. I remember being in a certain time and place, or being a certain version of myself that is different than maybe who I am in the day to day where I'm not plugged into that. Where I'm not surrounded by Jamaican people, food, and music, because I'm living in the suburbs of Laurel, Maryland.
Holland: So cultural code switching, almost?
Colette: Yeah. I can feel like I'm transporting myself by putting on Mavado. It's just me in my car, and I'm listening to Mavado, and I'm creating an atmosphere of Jamaicanness for myself, because no one's gonna create it for me. There's a certain power in that.
Holland: It sounds like you're describing learning like a second language in adulthood versus like childhood.
Colette: Almost, yeah. That's why I think it was so great in college when we had WCD (pronounced "Wicked")[306] and I was able to connect with other people of Caribbean descent after so long. There are all these things that we have in common and some of those were aspects that I hadn't actively thought about in a long time. Especially because coming to Maryland, my family here is very insular. We didn't have any other family in the area, and didn't have any family friends either. The most we would do that was tied to Jamaican culture was going to get Golden Krust.[307] Seeking out food. That's why I say food is really the main thing, you can find that anywhere.

Colette's Mavado-in-the-car self-transportation names the immediate-scale work the intermediary is no longer doing. Listening alone creates an atmosphere the Maryland environment won't supply. The comparison to "second language in adulthood" makes the labor's asymmetry visible: the reconstruction project is available, but it's harder than the original construction would have been, and the adult result carries a quality the childhood version would

[306] WCD is the Wellesley College student organization for Caribbean Development.

[307] Golden Krust Caribbean Restaurant is a regional Jamaican fast food restaurant chain located throughout the East Coast.

not have. Brooklyn childhood would have integrated the formation ambiently; Maryland adulthood integrates it by deliberate practice, and Colette is explicit about what the gap produces—the sense of being connected to an aspect of themselves that isn't easily reachable day to day.

Across their brother's differentiator strategy, the family-functions broadcast, and the heritage downshift, what surfaces is that the New York Caribbean formation was never infrastructurally given. It was constructed, ambiently, across years of intermediary-scale activity the Brooklyn geography made easy to sustain. When the geography changed, construction became conscious labor. Some version of the formation persists—in the brother's social handle, in Colette's heritage downshift, in the Mavado-in-the-car self-transportation—but its persistence depends on the deliberate cultural work the ambient Brooklyn configuration would otherwise have absorbed. What Redefining Belonging tracked as rupture, Severing Rhizomes tracks as the slow, iterative aftermath in which Caribbean identity gets rebuilt out of whatever scalar material the new geography allows.

Buds: Plural Futures

Across the three segments, a single analytical observation accumulates. Afro-West Indian communities in New York City use Caribbean popular music as a musical contact zone for transcultural identity construction, and what they construct is the New York Caribbean—a pluralized identity proposed as an alternative to the default "Black American" ascription American racial discourse imposes, articulated by way of distinction from that default rather than as a rejection of Blackness or Americanness.

Synergy surfaced the formation from three scalar vantage points: Sandy working it out in conversation, Shanice recognizing it as a name for a settled formation, Jennifer documenting its persistence through reconstruction when geography changed. *Caribbean vs. Black American* followed the formation into its political register, where Shanice, Jennifer, and Teresa each proposed a variant—single-term, dual, hyphenated—calibrated to her scalar configuration. And *Severing Rhizomes* followed Colette through the most complete subtraction of the intermediary-communal scale, and the reconstruction work that followed. Read sequentially, the arcs describe one formation in its making, its politics, and its unmaking.

The PI model's central tenent—that diasporic identity formation happens in the imaginary as a site of both/and pluralism holding cultural fluidity and structural inequality together without collapsing into hyphenated compromise or forced assimilation—isn't a theoretical abstraction. it's what my participants describe when they describe themselves. Sandy's three functional identities, Shanice's single-term Caribbean that lets New York silently do the American work, Jennifer's dual self-description that redistributes cultural content across Black American and Jamaican registers, Teresa's hyphenated compound arrived at through PWI-disrupted adolescence, Colette's post-Maryland distinction between "I'm Jamaican" and "I have Jamaican heritage"—none of these names a confused or compromised self. Each is the self-description SMT predicts would emerge under its specific scalar configuration, and each is a legitimate instance of the New York Caribbean formation rather than a partial approximation of some singular ideal. The formation is pluralized at its core: no single formulation exhausts it, and no viable self-description can be ruled out for failing to match another participant's configuration.

Limitless Pluralities names the ethnographic reality of what Afro-West Indian Americans in New York construct when all three SMT scales are engaged.

What each segment makes visible is that the New York Caribbean is a collective practice of proposition, performed through sustained engagement with CPM as contact zone, through which Afro-West Indian Americans articulate an alternative self-description the American racial system does not currently hold space for. The alternative becomes legible by way of distinction from the default "African American" or "Black American" ascription—but distinction is the vehicle, not the destination. Shanice proposes a single term while her body and her New York context silently carry the rest; Jennifer, in California, proposes a dual allocation that names two cultural registers her body holds simultaneously; Teresa proposes the hyphenated compound that insists the Americanness her scalar configuration produced be named alongside the Caribbean half.

Each offers a new option where the existing racial taxonomy previously had none. The PI model names what gets constructed. SMT names how the construction happens. Across both, the arcs land on the identities Afro-West Indian Americans in New York City have been constructing through their Caribbean popular music engagement for generations—in the process reshaping Black New York, producing what Sutton and Chaney call the Caribbeanization of the city, and naming formations that scholarship on the Black experience in America has largely failed to see, let alone to theorize.

Born Foreign: Locating “Home” in Liminal Spaces

Born Foreign closes Chapter 4's ethnographic work by naming the position these participants occupy that American belonging has no category for: born in the United States, raised inside Caribbean households whose customs, language, and rules differed from those of the country around them. To close the ethnography, I let the participants have the final word, presenting their responses to the two questions I posed at the end of each interview—what belonging to the Caribbean community means to each of them, and where they feel most fully themselves.

Stories Still Worth Telling: Caribbean Contributions & Black American Culture introduces the structure of the closing section and the decision to let the participants speak last. *What does being part of this community mean to you?* then carries the participants' responses, which arrive not through pride or claim but through gratitude, ambivalence, and a clear-eyed reading of what the parents carried that should not be celebrated uncritically: Shanice claims the legacy with its harms and its creativity in the same breath; Teresa worries about transmitting Caribbean culture to a next generation increasingly distant from the islands; Jennifer reaches repeatedly for "honor" as the word for what being Caribbean is, and is uneasy with needing the word at all. *Where do you feel most at home?* then carries Jennifer's and Colette's final accounts, which converge on a shared finding: home is not a fixed place but a relational state, located in the presence of people who have witnessed enough of the participant that no performance is required.

Stories Still Worth Telling: Caribbean Contributions & Black American Culture

I decided to let my participants have the final word so my dissertation will end by presenting some responses to the two questions I asked at the close of each interview. The responses that follow are organized by the question: *what does being part of this community mean to you?* And *where do you feel most at home?*

What does being part of this community mean to you?

Legacies of Generational Trauma: What's Taken & Left Behind

Shanice discussed claiming the legacy with the harms and the creativity in the same breath:

> **Shanice:** It really means to me that mode of true connection, of feeling like someone understands every part of you. Because I think living in America, it's very much Black and white, and it doesn't always pay attention to the idiosyncrasies of each culture, regardless of race. And I think there's something so special about being Caribbean—not just the food and the music and stuff, but it's the ability to go between all of those things. We are, in the good and bad ways, a result of this deep indigenous culture, this deep creativity, but also there's a conservatism in Christianity that's part of it. That's just part of it—and it's definitely bad for our continued growth and creativity, but because it's been entrenched, it also gives rise to other things. There is that specific Black culture within the English-speaking Caribbean that is just different and special and complicated, but I think gives rise to this creativity that is just unique. Obviously, academically, there's Glissant and creolization. But I think it's just an indescribable uniqueness that makes me proud to be part of it. And even though sometimes we can be our own worst enemy as a community, I'm so glad to be a part of it, because our history is so strong.

The conversation moved to Black American culture more broadly—to figures like Marcus Garvey, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Shirley Chisholm, whose Caribbean specificity tends to get folded into a homogenized Black American intellectual history. Shanice closed on what the work still ahead looked like to her:

> **Shanice:** I think the next step in the future is just not just continuing to uncover those real histories—because they're there—but also making sure that the communities that are historically there remain there and continue to grow.

In We Veins: Cultivation, Transmission, Preservation

The tail-end of my conversation with Teresa re:Caribbean-American schism shifted away from distinctions towards purposeful cultural cultivation and transmission for future generations:

> **Teresa:** I think that my kids will be American. I'll do my best. I'll play the music, I'll make the foods and all that stuff.
> **Holland:** (half joking) I'll send them there for a month and let them come back.
> **Teresa:** Right? But it's just inherently we're like losing that. Like all the people who are in Trinidad for me right now are old. I don't really know my younger cousins, because I haven't gone to Trinidad that often. In Saint Lucia, the people that I know are old. All the people who are my age are in London or New York or Atlanta or whatever whatever. I feel like the next generation is going to be American first, and then they will have to do the work to choose to be Caribbean.

Out of Many, One People: Complex Histories & Treading New Paths

Jennifer uses the "honor" (five times) to convey her feelings about her heritage. Interestingly, each mention further obscures its meaning and the confidence initially exuded is replaced with doubt: "which is sad, because it shouldn't be an honor."

> **Jennifer:** I touched on this earlier, about how it feels like such a badge of honor that I wear, of knowing how to cook the food, having access to the music, having access to even the accent and even understanding it. It feels like an honor. Being connected to culture, to me, is difficult. I really feel like in my late 20s, I've gotten such a respect for the depth of history of community, and so to me, to be a part of this community feels like such an honor. And it feels like—even though they gotta work on the homophobia and the transphobia—
> **Holland:** They've got a lot of things to work on.
> **Jennifer:** They've got a LOT that they need to work on, right? But it feels like an honor to be a part of every community I'm a part of, and especially this one. Especially because my friends who I know who are strictly Black, Caribbean, Black American, they love it, and they're proud of it, and I'm proud of it too. And it still feels like an honor to have some semblance—I mean, I can't chase my family tree that far back, but it feels like an honor to have some semblance of that, which is sad, because it shouldn't be an honor. But it feels like a privilege. So I do feel really good about it.

Where do you feel most at home?

Showing Up As Your Full Self

When asked the second question, I received two answers I found very intriguing—not because of what was said; rather, by their responses synergy and the different path they each took to reach the same conclusion. The first was Jennifer's, which rested on where in her identities she felt seen and could most fully herself.

> **Jennifer:** I'm still really into friends, found family. Even as I've gotten closer to my nuclear family—my mom, my brother—even as I'm closer to my nuclear family unit, I still think deep friendships and communities are the places I see myself most reflected. That doesn't even mean same identities, but it means I know I'm being seen, and I feel like I'm seeing people fully. So that's a really big space. And to tie it back to the sort of core of this project, at parties, in communal spaces enjoying music, I feel—I mean, you feel all the things. I feel powerful, I feel sexy, I feel capable. So those communal spaces—I know we sort of hate clubs, and I hate the club experience like, I wish people were on their phones less and danced more—but that space is like a place where I feel like, you know, you look good, you feel good. Everybody's vibing.

For context, some of the friends Jennifer is talking about, such as Teresa and me, are ones she made at St. Ann's.

The Absence Of Performance

The second Colette's, which slowly unfurled and eventually bloomed the more they sat with the question:

> **Colette:** The reason this is such a difficult question is because I think in general it's been hard for me to realize why I feel comfortable in some spaces and uncomfortable in others, and then understanding what masking looks like for me—including cultural masking. I feel like the spaces where I feel most comfortable are when I'm around those family members I grew up with—my immediate household, my grandma, aunt, cousin. Because that is where I grew up, and they have seen most aspects of who I am, although not all, because there are sides of myself I do hide. But as far as feeling comfortable and rooted and at home, it is those same spaces I grew up in. Maybe it does take decades of being around someone or being in a space for me to feel fully relaxed, comfortable, and at home there, because anywhere else, I feel like I'm putting on some aspect of acting or performance.
> **Holland:** For you, if home is wherever you're around your immediate family and the people who know you best, that makes the most sense.
> **Colette:** Yeah. I'm rethinking my answer, and I think that's the case. Even my dad's apartment in Manhattan—I feel at home there, whether or not he's there, because the way he's curated the space is a reflection of him, and I feel comfortable around that.

Neither answer runs through fixed or distinct lenses like Caribbean-ness or American-ness. Instead, their answers affix people, specifically those capable of performing the requisite labor of seeing the other person fully. For Jennifer, it's her friends. For Colette, it's their immediate family and the spaces they cohabitate collectively.

What *Born Foreign* refuses is the resolution the Lost-Found-Home framework might seem to promise. Home, in these accounts, is not a destination the participants have arrived at. It is the ongoing effort of holding belonging together in a country that is not where their parents came from but is, irreversibly, where the participants are. Belonging is held together not by geography, nation, or genre, but by the people willing to see them fully.

WELCOME HOME!: RETURNING TO THE POINT OF IT ALL

This dissertation began by asking where, and what, constitutes "home" in a diaspora, arguing that dancehall and soca operate as sites for transcultural identity construction within New York City's West Indian diaspora.

Lost and *Found* both examined the same childhood and adolescent experiences through different viewpoints to drive home a crucial point: identity is built, not inherited. Chapter 1, *Lost: Displacement and Longing*, traced transcultural identity construction through subtraction—the partial removal of the relatives, households, and neighborhoods that supplied Caribbean culture—revealing that the upbringing participants experienced as automatic in fact rested on specific, contingent supports, recognized as such only once they began to erode.

Whereas Chapter 2, *Found: Relocation and Belonging*, investigated transcultural identity construction through addition—the channels that deliver Caribbean belonging and the friendships that reinforce it—showing that belonging is assembled and handed across generations, then authored by the adolescent rather than only absorbed by them. Read together, both chapters construct a narrative of cultural inheritance as a series of choices distilled around subtraction and addition: choices made for them in childhood that are gradually supplanted by the im/explicit ones made by them in adolescence.

Chapter 3, *Liminality: Situating Cultural Transmission*, examined the developmental shift from adolescence to adulthood, where navigating culture becomes unavoidable and consequential because the nature of choosing changes. The transmission pathways that saturated childhood give way to recession, and what was once casually discarded is now scarce,

coveted, valued. But preservation isn't a task adults opt into. It arrives bound to a second form of inheritance the participant never chose. Explicit inheritance—practices, artifacts, and experiences accumulated in childhood and adolescence—can be preserved or relinquished as recession makes it scarce. While implicit inheritance—native- or foreign-born status—is assigned at birth and can't be changed. The chapter's two halves carry both forms. In *Cultural Capital & Legitimacy*, implicit inheritance surfaces: legitimacy is contested because status was set before the participant could weigh in, and so it must be constructed under negotiation rather than claimed by birth. While in *Present*, explicit inheritance plays out: belonging becomes an operation the participant performs, the labor of holding by hand what childhood once held ambiently. Across both, the chapter establishes a single shift: in adulthood, belonging is no longer an inheritance lived inside but something built. Heritage stops being a thing the participant has and becomes a thing they do—constructed against a status they did not choose.

Chapter 4, *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Locating "Home" in the In-Between*, delivers the dissertation's thesis ethnographically. Through sustained engagement with dancehall and soca as contact zones, participants construct the New York Caribbean: a transcultural self-description for which American racial discourse has no name. The chapter establishes the New York Caribbean as a collective proposal whose plurality is built in: each participant's version is the formation itself, and no version cancels another. *Born Foreign* names the position these participants occupy—a position not found in the American belonging lexicon. They were born in the United States, raised in Caribbean households whose customs, language, and rules differed from those of the country in which they lived. The section then asks where this constructed self

finds home. The answer: home isn't a place but the presence of people who know the participant so intimately, that no performance is required.

The four chapters do not refine the field's conceptual apparatus. They dismantle the premise it rests on. The scholarship measures belonging by fidelity to an island of origin: the barrels shipped home, the flags carried at parade, the maintained ties that signal Caribbean cultural ownership of urban space. It organizes participants by which island they claim. It calibrates authenticity by proximity to the native-born, treating the foreign-born as a diminished case. Even its most sophisticated frameworks—Lorick-Wilmot's triple identity consciousness, Vickerman's "tweaking a monolith"—gesture at hybridity while still treating the components being negotiated as fixed essences to be balanced or calibrated. Every framework in current use rests on the same premise: that there is a Caribbean essence somewhere, and the diaspora is a measure of distance from it.

That premise is wrong. The four chapters have now proved it. The Caribbean my participants inhabit is built, plural, and made real by the people building it. There never was a homeland-essence the scholarship was measuring against—only a performance committed to with enough conviction to feel like inheritance, and a field that mistook the commitment for the thing itself.

This isn't a marginal correction. The category "diaspora"—defined as displacement from an original place—presupposes the essence this work has shown does not exist. Every framework that ranks diasporic claims against a homeland-origin standard is measuring against

a yardstick that was never there. Decades of scholarship rest on a premise this dissertation has dismantled.

That dismantling has consequences. Diaspora must be reconceptualized without the homeland-essence assumption. Authenticity must be reconceptualized without the proximity-to-origin yardstick. The West Indian diaspora must be studied as collectively producing its identities rather than reproducing them with varying degrees of success. And the same intervention applies, in principle, to other diasporas measured against other supposed essences. Which diasporas, and how, and what new frameworks emerge in place of the old ones—that is work for the field, and for the next generation of scholars who will arrive in it already knowing that there is no single way to be Caribbean, and never was.

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