

## Fostering or Surrogate Mothering as an Immigration Tool

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### The Making of Transnational West Indian<sup>1</sup> Families in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

*In the neglected field of the history of the black immigrant experience in America, remarkably, Afro-Caribbean immigrants have attracted scholarly attention since the 1920s. The immigrants' prominent, even if controversial, role in black protest was what mostly attracted commentators and reviewers, who focused on the complex histories of activists like Claude McKay, Wilfred Domingo and, of course, Marcus Garvey. Lost in the narrative is the rich history of how children were fostered to make emigration possible and how mothers, grandmothers, and aunts worked with other family members to put in place anchors that created and supported connected families in the United States and the homeland. This article draws from the experiences of English-speaking West Indians in Boston to describe and explain how fostering and mothering shaped the arrival, settlement and communities of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the United States from 1910 to 1950. By doing this, it provides insights into the complex interplay of gender, class, identities and parenthood within early twentieth-century contexts. This historical background is useful for understanding the origins and evolution of more contemporary perspectives, which are getting more attention in a global, electronic twenty-first century.*

Caribbean women have always been an integral part of international labor migration. Historically, they have been a crucial component of the Caribbean labor force and wage economy, predominantly as domestic workers, dressmakers, washerwomen and petty traders. The 1946 Census of the West Indies showed that since the last decade of the nineteenth century, at least forty six percent of the women in both urban and rural areas were in the work force. This labor force was also migratory: from rural to urban centers within one island; between the different islands; and outside the Caribbean to parts of central and south America

and the United States. Although, numerically, male migrants clearly predominated throughout this period, and labor migration to popular destinations like Panama was depicted as male, a substantial number of women were also part of the movements in search of work.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the overwhelming majority were mothers with strong commitments to their children and other members of the extended family. As Irma Watkins-Owens, describing West Indian women in New York, points out: “Many migrating women, even among the ‘better laboring and middle classes’, came from backgrounds where women were socialized to support themselves and their children, often within a network of kin” (27). Similarly, renowned Caribbean family scholar Christine Barrow explains:

Black Caribbean motherhood and womanhood had been socially constructed to centre income-generation for survival and family support, and persistent poverty required that women continue to seek work as and where they could. (25)

The British West Indian community that emerged in Boston in the first half of the twentieth century grew within this context of Caribbean international migration. This article will describe and discuss how West Indian women, as biological and surrogate mothers, facilitated emigration and contributed to the development of an immigrant community that devised and sustained links with the homeland. First, it will provide a necessary overview of the Boston West Indian community; second, it will explain how the crucial processes of moving and resettling were made possible by fostering and mothering; and third, it will consider how the contributions of mothers were vital to the creation and maintenance of institutions that defined and anchored the community.

### **Boston West Indian Community: An Overview**

The Boston West Indian community, like others in New York and Miami, developed at a time that the Great Migration from the American south was altering the racial, ethnic and class make up of northern cities. Although Boston had one of the most established black communities, present since colonial times, its racial composition was significantly altered by the two unprecedented early twentieth-century streams of black migration—internally from the southern states and externally from the Caribbean. In 1910, Boston’s West Indians numbered 566 (five percent of the city’s total black population); in 1920 the number had risen to 2,877, and by 1950, the West Indian population was estimated at 5,000 (12 percent of the black population) (Showers Johnson 8). Overwhelmingly English-speaking, the majority of the immigrants came from British Caribbean colonies, particularly Jamaica, Barbados and Montserrat.

Demographically embedded in a larger black population, which was numerically overwhelmingly American-born, the West Indian community was not easily visible. But in reality, by the mid-1920's, the black immigrants had succeeded in creating a viable subculture, defined and anchored by a church (St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church), Island, benevolent and sports (cricket) associations, and a newspaper, the *Boston Chronicle*.

During this period, West Indian men were more prominent, mostly for their role in the vibrant African American culture, including the Harlem Renaissance and black protest. Who talks of the Harlem Renaissance without talking about Jamaican Claude McKay or the black struggle without acknowledging another Jamaican, Marcus Garvey? In Boston, although the community never gained the national prominence immigrants like Garvey brought to the one in New York, by the 1920s, the West Indian enclave was showcasing its own prominent leaders and activists, like the journalists of the radical *Boston Chronicle* and activist politicians like Victor Bynoe, William Harrison and Thaddeus Kitchener. The main point here is that like New York, it was the prominent, mostly middle-class men who were celebrated and remembered as anchors of an immigrant enclave within a larger African American community. The roles and prominence of these men, notwithstanding, in many significant ways women were as much the backbone of the community. Families were at the base of this community, and women, as mothers, were at the center.

### **Mothering as Facilitator for Emigration and Settlement**

In studies of West Indians migrating to Boston and elsewhere in the early twentieth century, one reads about facilitators like the United Fruit Company steamers, which introduced passenger ships that made transportation between the Caribbean and the eastern seaboard more affordable. There is always information about the so-called "Panama money," remittances that enabled prospective emigrants to buy tickets to make the move. What does not come out clearly under the rubric of facilitator, even though its impact is so vital, is mothering. What to do about children has always been one of the crucial considerations of moving and resettling. In the plethora of studies about children and childhood, a common theme is "children left behind." Mothers leaving children behind is an indispensable ingredient of migration and a salient facet of the historiography of the Afro-Caribbean family. In the period covered by this study, Afro-Caribbean families were widely described as unstable and dysfunctional. The British colonial government actually funded studies to demonstrate: the high rate of unsanctioned conjugal unions and "illegitimate" children; the prevalence of single-mother-headed households; and endemic migration, with its concomitant—children left behind (*West*

*Indian Royal Commission Report*; Clarke). This social problem approach, which emphasized family structure and rigidly-defined responsibilities, belied the realities of the lived experiences of the men, women and children whose lives were being dissected. It is for this reason that Christine Barrow urges that the family in the Caribbean should be studied within the concept of family processes rather than family structure. The processes provide more accurate depictions of how responsibilities are negotiated to make “extended kin network” and the “transnational family” work (Barrow 6-7). Indeed, while government-sponsored and other scholarship of the early twentieth century sought to reveal the social problems that plagued Afro-Caribbean families, the reality was that in many respects, their controversial non-conformity to Western-imposed nuclear, patrifocal, patriarchal family structures worked well for migration.

The first factor to consider is how childcare arrangements made emigration possible. Eighty percent of the women who immigrated to Boston throughout the period under review already had children, even though only about 30 percent were married. Furthermore, usually, they were the custodial parents at the time of emigration. As the Passenger Lists and other examining documents of the United States Immigration Services verify, nearly all of them left children behind. They left them with relatives—sisters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, godmothers—and friends. These relatives and friends were commonly referred to as the “other mothers.” The “transfer” of children upon emigration was usually not abrupt. As sociologist Douglass Midgett emphasizes, most of the children were likely to have grown up as part of a number of households, their interaction with adults extending to various categories of kin and non-kin (132). Nancy Foner, one of the few scholars to recently address the subject of Caribbean “transnational mothers,” makes a similar point: “this pattern of leaving children behind with relatives can be viewed as the ‘internationalization’ of long-standing West Indian tradition of childminding [sic] or child-fostering by female kin” (17). Thus, the socialization or parenting of children was often undertaken by many people with whom the children were already in regular contact. This “family process,” as Barrow would call it, proved to be a viable facilitator of emigration. Although male members may have expressed interest in the children’s welfare and even rendered financial support, very seldom were the men principal foster care givers. As anthropologist Isa Maria Soto emphasizes, when it came to this aspect of emigration, women and children were the protagonists (137).

Oral and written sources underscore the crucial roles played by this tradition of leaving children behind. For example, Mrs. Glenis Williams, who moved to Boston from Spanish Town, Jamaica in 1946, acknowledged:

*There is no way I could have come to America if my mother and my sister had not helped to take care of my two small children for two years, actually, total of four or five years; because before I moved to Boston, they helped me off and on when I went to Trinidad to work. My children knew them well as their other mothers by the time I came to Boston, so those two years before they joined me were not abrupt.*

Fostering or surrogate mothering, as an immigration tool, did not end in the homeland with West Indian-born children left behind. It is surprising that Christine Barrow's fine study did not highlight the very important category of "children sent away." It was common for mothers to send their American-born children to be "mothered" in the homeland for a period of time, while they and their husbands, partners and other family members pursued the American dream. Numerous accounts relate that had it not been for the relatives who temporarily "mothered" the second-generation immigrant/first-generation American children, families would not have been able to carve out the lives that fulfilled their migration aspirations—home ownership, education, ability to assist family members in the West Indies, and the attainment of middle-class status.

Work was an essential prerequisite for attaining these aspirations. Thus, not surprisingly, in Boston, as in other migration destinations, West Indian mothers worked as wage earners outside the home. Although about one third were skilled dressmakers, subtle and overt racism in this "progressive" northern city prevented them from entering the garment industry, which was one of the city's thriving economic sectors during that period (Showers Johnson 31-34). Instead, they were employed overwhelmingly in domestic service. They worked hard and long hours, as recounted in this statement by Victor Bynoe, a "left behind child" who later joined his parents in Boston at the age of 14:

*My parents worked very hard. My mother got up at six o'clock in the morning, went to work in a Jewish family's kitchen, scrubbed floors, washed the laundry and came back home at five o'clock in the evening. By that time I had supper ready for them [the family, which included six children]. She would go upstairs to a hairdressing room and work on people's hair till 10, 11 o'clock at night. I made sure my siblings were all right and everything in the house was taken care of. I did these with much pleasure because I knew that my parents were not working just for themselves but for the common good of the whole family.*

These older children, like Bynoe, who had reunited with their mothers, were a vital part of the communal childcare system developed in the new home. Family

clusters were established, with rotating venues and schedules for female members to care for children, while their mothers worked. Thus, reminiscent of life in the homeland, responsibilities were negotiated to devise communal strategies for childcare. It may be useful to recall here, as Christine Barrow emphasizes, “Caribbean children have been the collective responsibility of their extended families and communities, rather than belonging exclusively to their biological parents” (33). Clearly, the transplantation of this specific set of homeland values and traditions provided valuable social capital for mothering.

Nevertheless, sometimes this social capital was not enough. Many mothers made the decision of sending American-born children home to be cared for by grandmothers and other female kin. The practice of sending children home was not unique to the Boston West Indian community. It was a marker of the contemporaneous community in New York. In fact, the most famous “sent away” child, Shirley Chisholm,<sup>3</sup> was born into that West Indian community. As Chisholm recounts, her mother took her three little girls, aged three, two and eight months to Barbados in 1928: “she planned to board us there until she and father had saved enough to assure our future in the States” (5).

The exact length of time needed for this “future to be assured,” before the children could come back to America, varied from family to family and was determined by a number of circumstances in Boston and the homeland. “Sent away” children stayed with family in the West Indies anywhere from as little as one year to ten years. While the exact number of Boston-born “sent away” children is not known, from anecdotal evidence, it is safe to conclude that it did not reach the proportions of children left behind; and all the children returned to Boston at some point.

Mothers (and fathers) clearly benefitted from arrangements to leave children behind or send them away. But how did these childcare arrangements affect the children? Describing post-World War II migrations, Christine Barrow draws attention to the stigmatization of children left behind as “abandoned” and “shifted,” as “victims” and as “barrel children.” Barrel here refers to the container used by the parents in America to ship Western/American goods to the children left in the Caribbean. It is also symbolic of the heightened materialism and consumerism of the late twentieth century and early twenty first century. The evidence suggests that the outcomes were not so grave in the earlier period analyzed in this essay. Many of the second-generation West Indians interviewed for this study were “left behind,” “sent away” or knew about the experiences of siblings and others affected by these practices. They acknowledged that it was not always smooth-sailing and admitted to the emotional strain of separation, especially for those whose mothers had not been fully involved in internal Caribbean migrations before making the move to Boston. Overall, however, their assessment conveyed an acceptance

of these practices as part of the sacrifice their parents, especially their mothers, made for them and extended kin in America and the West Indies. Many spoke with awe of how their mothers performed long-distance transnational mothering before the age of jet planes and electronic communication. As one of them recounted:

*My mother sent me to Jamaica [from Boston] when I was five years old. Her vacationing friends took me on the steamship and delivered me to my mother's mother, my grandmother. My grandmother treated me well and I bonded with the large family. I did not see my mother for six years, but she was in my life. She knew everything about me, including my school report card, which she demanded to see and was usually sent through people traveling to Boston. Somehow her scolding and discipline were transmitted throughout all those years of separation. (Sandiford)*

This statement is representative of how the children in the early twentieth century viewed being left behind or sent away: they were actions necessary for the attainment of migration goals designed to benefit all.

### **Mothering as a Vital Shaper of the American West Indian Community**

Although not easily visible in the first half of the twentieth century, the West Indian subculture was a legitimate, viable, “other” Black Boston. There was a West Indian church—St. Cyprian’s; a West Indian paper—the *Boston Chronicle* and West Indian associations—from island associations (Jamaican Associates, Barbados Union and the Montserratian Progressive League) to sports (specifically, cricket) clubs, and activist/advocacy groups like the Boston branch of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Men and women were the architects of this community, although it was the men who featured prominently in the narrative. Mothering contributed significantly to the transnational contours of this Boston ethnic enclave.

Families were at the base of the community and mothers (as in biological mothers and all who performed mothering roles) were the central support of this base. Activities of the church, associations and other institutions were family affairs. Mothers were the ones most responsible for preparing the second-generation for involvement in the community’s activities. This task was vital for ensuring the continuation of distinctive Caribbean values and traditions beyond the first generation. Elma Lewis, prominent African American activist in Boston from the 1960s till her death in the 1990s, stressed this fact in her accounts about her experiences growing up in a transnational family<sup>4</sup>

that embraced the Barbadian and Trinidadian origins of her parents and the Boston/American realities of their new home—Elma’s own birthplace. This is best explained in Elma’s own words: “My mother, Edwardine Corbin Lewis, shaped our family into this West Indian–American family. From telling us stories about where they came from, to making sure that we went to St. Cyprian’s and attended and participated in West Indian activities, she kept us grounded in two worlds” (interview). Indeed, in 1932, when the Sons and Daughters of the Jamaica Associates was founded, a press release acknowledged that the women, “who cared for the young in America,” were the ones who insisted on the formation of this spin-off group of the older Jamaica Associates. The announcement also pointed out that the main objective of the organization was “the development of a Jamaican/West Indian British identity among the children” (*Boston Chronicle*, May 11, 1940).

No other recreational forum defined the immigrants’ “otherness” as much as cricket, a quintessential British sport. All the immigrants embraced it, even those who, for socio-economic reasons, had not been involved in the sport prior to immigrating. Its potential value as a prestigious marker of their foreign identities as West Indian and British was often raised in conversations in the community. Cricket clubs began to emerge in Boston almost with the first trickles of West Indian immigrants in the early 1900s. By 1920, there were six such clubs—the Windsors, Windsor Minors, West India A, West India B, Standards, and Wanderers. Although the players were all men, women were very instrumental in the development of the sport in their new home. They organized entertainment and raised money for uniforms and sports equipment. The tea breaks, a *sine qua non* for any cricket match, were catered and supervised by the women and their daughters. As a report in the community newspaper aptly emphasized, although the women and girls were never elevated to batters and bowlers, they were vital in transplanting the sport. Importantly, the report noted that “the mothers among us have done well in making cricket in Boston a family affair” (*Boston Chronicle*, February 11, 1933).

Maintaining transnational British West Indian identities within a racialized American society was not easy. The complicated nature of this endeavor is exemplified by the torment the mothers often experienced in their efforts to intervene in the conflict between race and ethnicity. While it was much easier, psychologically, for the first generation to hang on to their pre-migration identities, the second-generation, more in touch with their American realities, witnessed the torment of their in-between worlds. At the same time that the children were watching cricket matches and participating in the activities of the Sons and Daughters of the Jamaica Associates and other such organizations that defined their identities as West Indians and British, they were also attending public schools and interacting with neighborhood children, aspects



that defined their Black American identity. Part of mothering required helping the children move between race and ethnicity. But the children's agency was also an important factor in the cultural and psychological balancing act. They served as guides who facilitated their parents' transition from their pre-migration legacies to the present realities of their immigrant life. An anecdote explains this phenomenon beautifully:

*My son, a well brought up boy, came home from school looking rough. Some Irish kids had angered him by calling him a good for nothing nigger. This was not the first time, but this time it really got out of hand. I was furious with him. I said, "Why don't you just make it clear to these kids that you are not a Negro? You are a Bajan, a West Indian, a British." With tears running down his cheeks he replied: "But Ma, I am not completely those things. I am an American, a Black American. And you too, ma, when most people around here see you, they see a Negro." (Mason)*

This mother recalled that event as the moment when she became, among other things, a Black American.

It is thus important not to overstate the role of women by presenting them as mothers who served as the exclusive intermediaries in the shaping and maintaining of transnational communities. It is important to recognize and show how they collaborated with others—their male counterparts and children—in performing this role. Two people who grew up in the community articulate this point excellently in recounting the collaborative roles of their parents in ensuring their participation in the Garvey movement. Victor Bynoe alludes not just to his mother, but to his father as well, as he recalls:

*The first Sunday of my arrival here, my father and my mother took me to the meeting [UNLA meeting].... And that was the first time I was introduced to the Garvey movement.... I was fourteen years old.... They [UNLA members] had formed a group of young men, who were cadets. The women were in uniform, and they had the men's corps. The meeting was an every Sunday proposition. You had to go because your parents took you. (qtd. in Carden 9)*

Elma Lewis had similar recollections of family collaboration:

*I was raised to be a pan-African. My father was a follower of Marcus Garvey, and we belonged all our lives to the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Mother was a Black Cross [Women's branch of the association] nurse and father belonged to the African Legion [the men's*

*branch*]. *My brothers sold the Negro World* [the association's publication] and *I was a Girl Guide*.

Still, it was a fact that, as mothers, the women were well placed to be privy to the many intricate aspects of the involvement of their children (and their entire household) in community activities. It was in fact in this position that they became primary contacts between the homeland/Caribbean families and the Boston/immigrant family. Many immigrants and their children explained how mothers were more committed to writing letters (this was the first half of the twentieth century before e-mails and facebook), sending parcels, monetary remittances and keeping in touch in other ways with relatives in the Caribbean. Very often, this devoted connection was motivated by the mothers' responsibility to their children (both Caribbean- and American-born) left in the care of relatives in the Caribbean—a kind of “mothering across the sea.”

The enduring interactions across locations demonstrate that it is important not to restrict the designation of transnational families to the immigrant families in Boston, which were more easily recognized as West Indian and American. As investors and participants in certain aspects of migration, the “stayers,” like the “movers,” were transformed by the multiple facets of immigration. Consequently, families in the West Indies legitimately became transnational families as well. By taking care of children left behind or sent away and benefiting from monetary and other remittances, the Caribbean families remained firmly connected to the members who had moved. Their family identities and structures, like those in Boston, were influenced by circumstances in the West Indies and America.

## Conclusion

Migration inevitably involves multiple sites and diverse networks of people. The Boston West Indian community of the first half of the twentieth century was formed by immigrants who developed identities and institutions designed to distinguish their community and ensure its continuing links with the homeland. Women were vital to the establishment of this community, as wage-earners, founders, and supporters of organizations, and household and community leaders. Their contributions in these capacities were often driven and shaped by their identities and responsibilities as mothers. Consequently, through diverse strategies for fostering and mothering, and in collaboration with women in the Caribbean, they helped make the migration to Boston possible and they helped carve out the transnational immigrant community that emerged.

<sup>1</sup>The terms “West Indian” and “Caribbean” will be used interchangeably to refer to the region and people of the islands of the Caribbean, including Jamaica, Barbados, Montserrat, Trinidad and Tobago, St Kitts and St. Vincent.

<sup>2</sup>For example, demographer George Roberts notes that between 1911 and 1921 an estimated 44 percent of the population decline in Barbados was due to the emigration of women (270).

<sup>3</sup>Shirley Chisholm was the first black woman to be elected to the U.S. Congress and the first woman to contend for the Democratic presidential nomination.

<sup>4</sup>Transnational families, as succinctly defined by Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, are “families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood,’ even across national borders” (3).

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