Consuming Identities

Towards a Youth Culture–Centered
Approach to West Indian Transnationalism

China takes the A train to the Fulton Street/Broadway Nassau stop to get to her job as a sales clerk at a clothing store near Ground Zero, one of two after-school jobs China holds. It is just after 4 p.m. on a Friday in August, and, on this particular afternoon, China rides the train with her best friend, Nadine, and two other friends, Neema and Mariah. The subway car is full of businesspeople leaving early from Wall Street jobs, vacationing tourists, and a few local New Yorkers of varying ethnicities. The businesspeople are mostly White and dressed in suits. The tourists, dressed in shorts and tee shirts with cameras swinging from their necks and purses held close, are also White. Both the tourists and the businesspeople appear to be uneasy sharing such close quarters with the Black teenage girls. China and Nadine wear jeans, tight t-shirts, and sneakers, while Neema and Mariah wear cotton shorts with matching tank tops, and inexpensive, trendy sandals. The four girls are acutely aware of how the other commuters regard their presence on the subway car. The girls seem to spontaneously react to and feed the avoidance and the silent disapproval of the White passengers by yelling loudly across the subway car, taking up more seats than they need, and laughing boisterously. China, whose hair is dyed the same shade of gold as that of her idol, the R&B/hip-hop singer Mary J. Blige, is listening to her iPod. She sits on the opposite side of the subway car, facing the other girls. China sings loudly over the divide, entertaining her friends (who are in hysterics at her poor singing) and visibly annoying the other commuters around her.

China: [singing melodramatically] Another lesson learned! Better know your friends! Or else you will get burned! Gotta count on me! ’Cause I can guarantee that I’ll be fine. . . . No more pain, no more pain, no more drama in my life, no one’s gonna hurt me again.
China is severely off-key as she belts out the Mary J. Blige ballad “No More Drama,” from the album of the same name. Hamming it up, arms flailing, China does her best impersonation of Blige’s performance in the song’s music video, as her friends’ laughter and the stares of the other passengers intensify. Although the Blige song is about the pain of a broken heart, sung from the perspective of a woman looking back on her youth, the lyrics seem especially relevant to China’s life. At seventeen, she has already experienced prolonged separation from her mother, who initially left China in Barbados before reuniting with her when China was ten. China has come to rely heavily on her best friend, Nadine, a first-generation Trinidadian, who moved in with China’s family after Nadine’s mom took a job in a southern city during Nadine’s senior year in high school. Like many West Indian children and adolescents, even before immigrating to the United States, these girls were accustomed to being cared for by extended kin. Nadine’s and China’s experiences of being raised by grandmothers in the Caribbean for several years before reuniting with their mothers is a common practice of “child fostering,” a Caribbean kinship solution to the rifts accompanying immigration.² Both girls know the heartache of such separation, and the self-reliance they learned in their parents’ absence continues to shape their lives; they use their own hard-earned money for luxuries like iPods, cell phones, and professionally manicured false nails, in addition to necessities like food and clothes. China’s life story parallels Blige’s song in terms of both the hardship of parental separation and the “drama” that characterizes life for children in the Caribbean who learn to be independent at young ages and who face daily challenges and dangers, including tending to younger siblings and walking to school without adult supervision. To attend school, these children journey alongside speeding cars on poorly paved roads where pedestrians are routinely struck and killed.

China identifies with the adversity Mary J. Blige has overcome, as illustrated both in her music and in the performer’s personal narrative. Asked why Blige is her favorite singer, China responded:

She’s mad real. She don’t front for nobody. If you listen to her music you learn stuff about her life and how she struggled to get where she is. She’s not just singing about how she’s out at the club. She’s mad real.

While Blige’s personal struggles, which include overcoming poverty and drug addiction, resonate with China, her subway performance is less about China’s own “drama” and more an action staged in defiance of her surround-
ings. Unlike the many child performers, such as break dancers and candy sellers who earn a living on the subway, China’s mini-performance is improvised and not intended to please anyone other than herself and her friends. She negotiates the public space of the subway as if on the attack and uses her poor singing as an affront to the other riders. China and her friends are accustomed to adults, especially White adults, regarding them suspiciously in public settings. When they shop for clothes, salespeople and other shoppers observe their every move, certain that they are shoplifters. At school, asserting a West Indian identity can sometimes put China in the good graces of teachers, but in settings such as the subway and retail stores, China is stereotypically marked by her age, gender, and race.

Placing Black Youth

China and Nadine are among the West Indian teenage girls you will get to know in this book. While China’s raucous rendition of Blige’s song took place on a New York City subway, Black teenage girls are overwhelmingly represented in national and global popular discourses in negative terms, either as being “at risk” for teenage pregnancy, obesity, or sexually transmitted diseases or as helpless victims of inner-city poverty and violence. Examples include the pregnant, overweight, and abused young woman depicted in the film *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* and the fat-lipped and scarred pictures of Barbadian hip-hop/R&B star Rihanna after famously being assaulted by her boyfriend, singer Chris Brown. Meanwhile, popular images represent their male counterparts as dangerous menaces to society or as hapless casualties of pathological family life; common portrayals of Black inner-city teenage boys include dark-faced, hooded drug dealers, aspiring rappers, and, the character Precious’s male equivalent, the illiterate football player rescued by an affluent White family in the film *The Blind Side*. These representations do not fully convey the diverse, real life experiences of Black teenagers. However, such popular representations are pervasive and often portray Black adolescents’ consumer and leisure culture as corruptive, uncivilized, and pathological. This book is intended to intervene and to heed the alarm that educators, policymakers, parents, and the media have sounded with regard to the negative ways in which teens in general, and Black teenage girls in particular, are being “influenced” by popular Black youth culture. *She’s Mad Real* takes Black youth culture as its starting point, arguing that West Indian adolescents are strategic consumers of popular culture and that, through this consumption, they assert far more agency in defining race, eth-
nicty, and gender than academic and popular discourses tend to acknowledge. The consumer and leisure spheres are revealed not as unabashed arenas of pleasure and power but as dynamic sites in which marginalized Black teenage identities are produced and contested, confined and liberated. Indeed, we will see that youthful racial, gender, and nation-based identities are critically constructed in popular representations.

Popular representations of and about Black teenagers do not exist in a vacuum but, rather, are placed within local, national, and global contexts. This ethnography examines the relationship between place and Black youth culture, exposing the spatial construction of West Indian girls’ subjectivities. China and her friends attend an afterschool program at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum (BCM) in Crown Heights. The museum program and her job near Ground Zero are two wage-earning positions China holds in addition to attending high school. Yet, in public places such as subway cars, movie theaters, and clothing stores, China and her friends are viewed not as hardworking citizens and valued consumers but as threats to civic decorum. This book situates West Indian girls’ consumer and leisure culture within public spaces in order to interrogate the ways in which teens like China are marginalized and policed while they attempt to carve out places for themselves within New York’s contested terrains.

**She’s Mad Real: Authenticity, Femininity and Popular Black Youth Culture**

*She’s Mad Real* paves new ground by engaging concerns about female adolescent identity formation vis-à-vis consumer culture with the social construction of West Indian notions of belonging. It addresses questions such as: What constitutes Blackness in today’s global world? Are teenage girls equipped to form strong self-definitions in the face of a hip-hop culture that is largely characterized as corruptive? The pursuit of “authentic Blackness” takes center stage in youthful constructions of Black femininity, and China emphasizes this centrality when she describes Mary J. Blige as “mad real.” She plainly articulates African diaspora scholars’ theorizations regarding the importance of authenticity in popular Black youth cultures (Fleetwood 2005; Gilroy 1993; Gray 1995; Hall 1996; Jackson 2005; Kelley 1997; Ogbar 2009). This book puts West Indian and African American girls in dialogue with scholars who have analyzed the paradoxes attached to notions of Black authenticity. The West Indian and African American girls you will meet strive to identify “real Black people” among the contradictory media images
routinely offered to them. This is, of course, a tangled and precarious exercise. For West Indian youth in particular, “realness” is contingent and deeply problematic—they struggle to negotiate “authentic” West Indian selves while sometimes simultaneously identifying with African Americans. The quest for authenticity also has significant implications for the youths’ gender identities. For China and her friends, calling a performer like Mary J. Blige “mad real” is the highest compliment they could bestow because it connotes a feminine style that confronts and circumvents mainstream racialized and classed notions of beauty. Thus, being “mad real,” “really for real,” and “keepin’ it real” reemerge throughout this text as a central trope.

The anthropologist John L. Jackson Jr. has critiqued how authenticity functions in contemporary academic discourses, charging that a reliance on authenticity “explains what is most constraining and potentially self-destructive about identity politics” (Jackson 2005: 12). Jackson follows philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah in highlighting the shortcomings of social authenticity, arguing that this form of collective identity formation relies heavily on “scripts,” or narratives “that people use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories” (Appiah 1996; Jackson 2005: 12). Jackson writes:

These scripts provide guidelines for proper and improper behavior, for legitimate and illegitimate group membership, for social inclusion or ostracism. We use these scripts as easy shorthand for serious causal analysis, and scholars who invoke “racial authenticity” usually do so to talk about how such scripts delimit individuals’ social options—describing how racial identity can be made to function a lot like social incarceration, a quotidian breeding ground, claims Paul Gilroy, for even more brutal forms of fascism (Gilroy 2000; Jackson 2005: 13).

Rather than interrogating authenticity to “delimit individuals’ social options,” in this book we will come to see girls’ reliance on “being mad real” as central to their subjectivity formations as critical social actors. While a number of scholarly analyses interpret the pursuit of realness as serving to essentialize Black people and limit Black youths’ chances for success by situating them outside White mainstream America, She’s Mad Real reveals how girls use invocations of realness to (re)write their own social scripts (Fleetwood 2005; Gilroy 1993).

Instead of seeing Black girls’ invocations of “being for real” as a form of objectification that obscures agency and denies humanity (Jackson 2005), we can interpret attempts at identifying and claiming authenticity or “real-
ness” as critical responses to popular and public policy discourses that ignore the complex realities of their lives. China’s subway performance is a clamorous demand to be heard, and her identification with Blige signals her determination to overcome daily challenges. For China and her peers, finding authenticity in consumer culture and claiming public space are contradictory exercises marked by crossing perilous boundaries between the private and the public spheres, between consumption and production, and between work and leisure. As they navigate these boundaries, youth of color are often misunderstood, viewed as criminals, or rendered invisible. Compare the description of China and her friends with one of some subway performers on the same train line: “Show time! Show time! It’s show time folks! Show time!” Any frequent rider of the New York City subway in recent years recognizes this prompt. It marks the beginning of a familiar scene. When the uptown A trains stops at Canal Street, most seats on the train are occupied. Three brown-skinned children enter. There are two boys; one appears to be about thirteen years old, and the other one, who is much taller and who is carrying a boom box, looks to be about sixteen. The smallest child is a skinny little girl who cannot be more than ten years old. Setting the boom box down next to the doors, the taller boy delivers the “It’s show time!” cue. Seeing that a performance is about to ensue, a few people seated closest to the group move further away. As Michael Jackson’s “You’ve Got Me Working Day and Night” plays on the boom box, the little girl starts to move, with the boys flanking her, their backs against the subway doors. As the train careens forward, the little girl does back flips, cartwheels, and handstands. Michael Jackson’s voice soars: “You got me workin’, workin’ day and night . . . And I’ll be workin’, from sun-up to midnight!” The little girl is fazed neither by the screeching abrupt stops of the train nor by the protruding feet and shopping bags of commuters. Some tourists look on in amazement, cheering the little girl on, while others appear annoyed by the impending threat of limbs flying through the air. Wearing cotton shorts and a dirty tee shirt, the girl looks fragile as she contorts herself, deftly avoiding the subway car’s center pole. Seasoned straphangers have seen this show before and continue reading their books and their copies of the Daily News. Next, the tallest boy begins his routine, consisting of more sophisticated break-dancing moves. The boy’s muscles bulge as he spins on one hand, then spirals on his head, his legs somehow managing not to hit poles and people. The last boy is the most talented. He works the subway car pole in a move that oddly resembles a stripper’s routine, but, when he flips his body 360 degrees, his lanky legs hit the subway car ceiling with a loud thud. Passengers gasp at the sound and
applaud as the little girl makes her rounds, collecting money in a black backpack. I hand her a one-dollar bill and count at least an additional ten dollars going in to her collection. A passenger comments as he hands over a dollar bill, “Look at this! Twenty dollars in ten minutes! How old are you?” The little girl smiles and says, “I’m eight.” Before I get a chance to ask any questions, the group vanishes through the momentarily open subway doors. The train lurches on.

There are variations on the scene I’ve just sketched. Most frequently, the performers are Black or Latino and are preadolescent or teenage boys. The little girl I described is the only girl I have seen in such a performance. An alternative and perhaps more common scenario is one in which a group of three or so teens, again usually boys, enters a subway car, announcing they have candy for sale. “Candy! Get your peanut M&Ms, Snickers, Reese’s Pieces! One dollar!” When I first noticed the candy sellers, years ago, the youth would proclaim, “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! We’re selling candy to raise money for our school trip!” More recently, however, children like these have announced, “I’m just keepin’ it real. I’m not selling candy for a school trip or anything. Just trying to stay off the streets and get a little money in my pocket.”

Although the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) prohibits peddling on subway cars, I have never seen police officers enforce this rule in relation to young candy sellers or break dancers. That these youngsters are primarily Black and Latino both speaks to and feeds notions of racialized and age-based inequalities in New York City. Their acts of literally commandeering the public, ostensibly MTA-controlled space of the New York City subway cars can, at first glance, be read as an effort to “take back” public spaces that overwhelmingly displace and marginalize youth of color. For tourists, these youth affirm images of New York City as gritty and spontaneous, while feeding stereotypes of needy “inner-city” youth. New Yorkers wonder if this is a scam—if someone “puts these kids up to it.” The fact that they all seem to speak from the same rehearsed script and that their routines share similar elements raises questions about whether they are coached by adults who might be taking the profits. Some comments on Internet blogs come from riders who regard the youth as nuisances who, in attempting to hawk their goods and talents, “bombard” commuters, while other commentators sympathize with what they assume to be needy kids. Reporters have sought to get to the bottom of these entrepreneurial activities, which, at least in the case of the candy sellers, are indeed usually orchestrated by adults. According to ABC News, about fifty thousand children nationwide are involved in
candy-selling rings led by nefarious adult crew leaders with criminal records. Reportedly, the children are often either from housing projects or homeless, picked up in vans and bused to subway stops or suburban neighborhoods, where they ring bells and peddle candy (Leamy 2008: n.p.). The children are exploited, working twelve-hour shifts with no bathroom breaks and receiving pennies on what they earn (Leamy 2008). Yet, as much as the candy-crew leaders exploit these children, efforts to assign blame for their predicament echo entrenched discourses that pathologize urban children and their parents. The ABC News report, for example, states, “Parents go along with it because they don’t care or don’t know better” (Leamy 2008). This explanation does not allow for parents who are themselves socially and economically isolated, lacking employment, housing, and access to child care. The story seems to be more nuanced for the break-dance crews (also known as b-boy crews), some of which are composed of devoted and remarkably disciplined dancers steeped in the hip-hop dance traditions of the Bronx. Distinct from the group of child dancers described earlier, because there is less evidence of exploitation and because they hail from a Bronx tradition of the public production of hip-hop, b-boy crews regularly perform on subway platforms and in cars “making money foot over hand” according to the New York Times (Goodman 2009). Generally older than the youth I witnessed, members of these crews have been arrested for panhandling, but a few nights in jail have not been enough to make them abandon the pleasure and profits they garner from performing on the subways (Goodman 2009).

The complex and contradictory stories of all of these youth remain largely unknown to most casual observers. Their presence in New York’s public spaces is regarded alternatively as a nuisance and as an entertaining oddity. They are avoided, pitied, or exoticized. They are either exploited pawns or crafty entrepreneurs. In the sketches of young subway dancers and candy sellers we have seen, these urban minority youth are negotiating the spheres of labor, leisure, and consumption to turn a profit and to demand the attention of a public that rarely engages with them. The examples of the candy crews and break dancers reveal that, even on the surface, minority teens are making creative, nontraditional, and dangerous efforts to earn wages in a labor market that exploits them and leaves them largely disenfranchised.

The historian Robin Kelley’s term “play-labor,” whereby “the pursuit of leisure, pleasure and creative expression is labor,” can be applied to the dancers and candy sellers who, like many African American urban youth, “have tried to turn [their] labor into cold hard cash” (Kelley 1997: 45). Kelley theo-
izes that, for urban minority youth with few resources and unequal access to employment, the lines between play and labor become blurred, and play becomes a means to earn wages. The child performers’ version of play-labor clearly fits within Kelley’s framework, in the sense that dancing to hip-hop has been interpreted as a central component of urban youth’s leisure or play culture, while it has also, from its inception, been a mechanism for earning money. Compared with that of the child performers and candy sellers, China’s impromptu singing is a less remarkable but also disruptive form of public play that is not aimed at earning wages but that does the work of annoying, confounding, and distancing the adults around the girls. China’s antics do not inspire tourists to dole out cash so much as they provoke them to hold tighter to their purses. Yet, China and the subway performers are linked in the sense that both (re)produce Black youth culture, in the form of singing or dancing and by physically co-opting public space. But the limited descriptions provided here do not give us the whole picture, even when accounting for ABC News’s efforts to “dig deeper” into the candy sellers’ case. Are the subway performers and peddlers representative of New York City’s Black teenagers? Kelley notes that “some African American youth” negotiate what he sees as a hazy divide between play and labor and that, for these youth, play is more than “an expression of stylistic innovation, gender identities, and/or racial and class anger—increasingly it is viewed as a way to survive economic crisis or a means of upward mobility” (Kelley 1997: 45, emphasis added). Kelley’s notion of play-labor is perfectly in line with the instances we have just considered and his own examples, including break dancing, graffiti art, the creation and commodification of hip-hop, selling drugs, and sex work, all involve youth who, like the youngsters I witnessed on the train, respond to massive unemployment and severe disenfranchisement by turning play into “an alternative to unfulfilling wage labor” (Kelley 1997: 53). And, as Kelley notes, this form of play is neither idle nor easy; it often entails hours of coaching, practice and body conditioning (Kelley 1997: 67). Although the New York Times article alludes to “making money foot over hand” and the subway observer surmised that the young dancers I witnessed collected “twenty bucks” (notably a more generous estimation than my count), minority youths’ play-labor incomes are vastly overshadowed by the enormous profits of the film and recording companies that capitalize on Black youth culture’s creative vitality. Kelley’s framework also addresses the gender disparity I observed; minority boys figure more prominently among those who perform on the subway for money—girls are largely invisible in such forms of play-labor. Noting the predominance of Black boys in public examples of play-labor, Kelley asserts “con-
trolling women’s access to public space... and forms of play [is] central to the construction of masculinity” (Kelley 1997: 55).

Even with Kelley’s extremely valuable “suggestive observations,” however, questions are left unanswered about subway candy sellers and break dancers: Are these youth African American? Caribbean? African? Latino? How do their forms of play-labor compare with the practices of the majority of New York City’s minority youth? And, while Kelley’s theorization provides a meaningful explanation of why *some* Black youth engage in largely illegal play-labor, it does not reveal much about Black youth like China and her friends, who are neither selling candy on trains nor break dancing for their supper. Kelley is to be commended for exploring the gendered ways in which public space and play-labor are defined and negotiated, but he does not deal with how teens, Black girls in particular, whose parents, to reverse the problematic phrasing of the ABC News report, *do* care and *do* know better, might also be involved in equally creative forms of play-labor that do not fit neatly into hegemonic society’s notions of Black teenagers as “at risk,” “needy,” and “dangerous.”

How do gender, ethnicity, class, and access to education influence how Black teenagers form their subjectivities in relation to consumer culture and the city’s public spaces? We can garner insights into what academics, educators, politicians, psychologists, and social workers think about urban minority girls by reading books and newspaper articles and by watching talk shows and popular films, but how can we learn about these girls from their own perspectives?

This ethnography invites its reader to take a downtown train to Brooklyn, staying on long after the candy crews, break dancers, men in suits, hipsters, and fashionistas have dwindled, to explore the lives of Caribbean immigrant and African American teens in the neighborhoods of Flatbush and Crown Heights. It is a journey you will not experience if you visit adolescents in schools, youth detention centers, or homeless shelters; it centers on “normal” teens making remarkable strides in the face of gendered and race-based discrimination not altogether different from the challenges faced by young subway peddlers and performers. This is a transnational journey that takes leisure culture and consumption as its starting point but uses them as a lens through which we can see some of the complexities of African diasporic teenage subjectivities. The soundtrack to this journey is a fusion of West Indian dancehall and hip-hop, and the next stop on the train is Kingston... Avenue, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

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This book examines how Brooklyn’s West Indian teenage girls articulate gender and racial identities through their immersion in consumer culture and public leisure activities. For West Indian young women and for their African American peers, the realm of leisure and consumption is a contested terrain, filled with opportunities for self-actualization but fraught with difficult choices and the pressures of racial discrimination as they confront a hegemonic culture composed of retailers, shopkeepers, fellow consumers, teachers, and policy makers. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork with first- and second-generation West Indian girls who frequented the Brooklyn Children’s Museum in Crown Heights and the Flatbush YMCA in Flatbush, Brooklyn, I situate girls’ uses of consumer goods and mass-mediated images within their extracurricular and leisure activities.

This volume reveals how West Indian adolescent girls’ identities are mediated through a tenuous relationship between host and home countries, between adulthood and childhood, and between being Black and West Indian—all within the larger urban context of life in New York City. It expands the current transnationalism literature that centers chiefly on adults and intervenes in an academic and popular race discourse that tends to focus not on college-bound teenagers like the ones to whom we will soon be introduced but, rather, on “problem youth of color;” seen, at best, as victims of “inner-city” poverty and a violent mass media. I advocate in this book for a youth culture–centered approach to West Indian transnationalism, demonstrating that teenagers are most animated when talking about consumer culture and arguing that, in fact, youthful racial, gender, and nation-based identities are predominantly constituted in popular representations.

West Indian Youth in Context

Before turning to the youth whose experiences will dominate this text, I would like to situate readers by providing an overview of West Indians within America’s foreign-born Black population and by offering a brief summary of scholarly analyses relevant to this study. About three million people within the United States’ Black population are foreign-born. These are primarily immigrants from the Caribbean and from Africa. Afro-Caribbeans, most commonly known as West Indians (descendants of African slaves settled in the Anglophone countries of the Caribbean), now make up 70 percent of the foreign-born Black population, about 2.1 million people (Massey et al. 2007: 245). One-third of New York City’s Black population is foreign-born. In Miami, West Indians make up more than 48 percent of the Black
community, and they are expected to soon outnumber the native-born Black population (Fears 2002). According to data from the 2000 U.S. Population Census and the 2008 American Community Survey (also conducted by the Bureau of the Census), a significant proportion of New York’s City’s rapidly growing foreign-born Black population hails from the Caribbean (33%), in particular Jamaica (8%), Haiti (7%), and the Dominican Republic (6%). The rapid increase in the number of Black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa has sparked debate and competition, with journalists theorizing that America’s Black population is just as diverse as its Asian and Latino communities and with sociologists and anthropologists noting that negative stereotyping on both sides divides the foreign- and the native-born Black communities. The ongoing controversy surrounding whether President Barack Obama is legitimately African American provides a glimpse into the questions, complexities, and misunderstandings surrounding foreign-born Black immigrants and their American-born children.

This book builds on a body of scholarship focused on exploring how first- and second-generation immigrants from nations such as Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Guyana, Grenada, and St. Vincent reconcile their identities with American social constructions of race. These immigrants come from ethnically diverse countries populated primarily by descendants of African slaves and East Indian indentured servants. Still, with the exception of Guyana (where East Indians constitute the majority), West Indian immigrants come primarily from nations where people of African descent are the majority. After migrating to the United States, West Indian youth, in particular, carefully negotiate their subjectivities within cultural contexts where long-held discriminatory racializations accompany black or brown skin. Drawing on research with first- and second-generation West Indian girls in Brooklyn, New York, this ethnography argues that leisure and consumer culture provides a complex and fruitful site for delineating West Indian transnationalism. Many scholars of West Indian migration who situate identity formation within the rubric of transnationalism neglect popular culture, focusing instead on the contexts of work, political activities, and the creation of social networks. Although extremely valuable, these studies have concentrated on adults and on labor, rather than on youth and leisure. This work places West Indian adolescent girls’ leisure culture at the analytical center and investigates their strategic subjectivities amid contemporary discourses of Black youth culture in general, and hip-hop in particular, as a corruptive element. Hip-hop’s transnational appeal, fraught with gender inequality and racialized notions of authenticity, demands serious critical analysis. Because youth are
on the front lines of global processes (Maira and Soep 2005), studying popular Black youth culture presents a crucial opportunity for anthropology to address critical debates surrounding diasporic belonging.

This ethnography charts the course for a youth culture–oriented approach to Caribbean Diaspora Studies that speaks to the particularities of working with this stage in the life cycle. Even works that strive to complicate theoretical frameworks like “transnationalism” and “diasporic homelands” by emphasizing Caribbean family networks have privileged adult migrants’ experiences (Olwig 2007), marginalizing the significance of youth consumer culture.6 When immigrant youth have been studied, West Indian migration scholars have made only passing references to consumer culture, focusing instead on schools (López 2003; Ogbu 1990; Waters 1999, 2001). Recently, growing attention has been paid to second-generation immigrants and to youth culture in the broader migration literature, and in the works of scholars interested in globalized culture and African diasporic subjectivities. But this book’s critical imperative is to recognize that an explicit engagement with how West Indian transnationalism is contextualized within youthful subjectivities would enhance our understandings of how transnational processes are socially constructed.

She’s Mad Real unpacks the unique dynamics of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with adolescents in public leisure settings. This approach fills a void in that there is little ethnographic work on West Indian migration and consumer/leisure culture from an adolescent perspective. We can attribute this void to three factors. First, researchers often privilege adults as more legitimate informants; second, scholars favor schools and labor, rather than leisure and consumption, as more acceptable sites of inquiry; and third, ethnographic approaches have relied on traditional methodological strategies better suited to working with adults than with adolescents.

West Indian Migration Studies

Brief attention to the literature on West Indian migration allows us to address the first two factors simultaneously. Questions of ethnic identification contextualized within gender, labor, residence, and political activities have preoccupied West Indian migration scholars. Roy Bryce-Laporte described West Indians as “invisible immigrants” in a 1972 essay, framing the question that consumes the body of West Indian migration literature: What comparisons and contrasts exist between the experiences of Black West Indians and African Americans? In a thoughtful historiography of West Indian migra-
tion studies, sociologist Philip Kasinitz dates social science research on West Indian immigrants to Ira De A. Reid’s 1939 study *The Negro Immigrant*, which began the trend of comparing West Indians with African Americans (Kasinitz 2001:259). Kasinitz traces the West Indian “model minority” myth to Reid and, later, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, two social scientists and extremely influential policymakers who positioned West Indians against the “underclass” thesis that described African Americans as developing “pathological” cultural traits (Glazer and Moynihan 1970; Kasinitz 2001:259). In the deeply problematic “underclass” rhetoric, which has since been revealed as unduly influenced by negative stereotypes of African Americans, West Indians purportedly enjoyed greater employment and demonstrated a stronger work ethic, a penchant for entrepreneurialism, and a higher value for education. The “model minority” myth was taken up by Thomas Sowell in the 1980s and inspired a strident debate in West Indian migration studies (Kasinitz 2001: 260; Sowell 1981). Important corrections were offered by scholars including Constance Sutton and Elsa Chaney (1987) and Kasinitz (1992), who complicated the assimilation framework by analyzing how New York City neighborhoods were increasingly becoming Caribbeanized.

A number of other related themes have animated the work of West Indian migration scholars. Gender divisions in the labor market and women’s work as domestics, as nannies, and in network-building social institutions such as rotating credit unions took center stage in studies by Nancy Foner (Foner 1978, 2001, 2005). Suzanne Model and Milton Vickerman pondered the socioeconomic accomplishments of the first generation (Model 1991, 1995; Vickerman 1999). Reuel Rogers has considered how Afro-Caribbean immigrants reconcile their political identities with those of African Americans, while Irma Watkins-Owens has studied the social networks created by West Indian immigrant women in turn-of-the-century Harlem (Rogers 2001, 2006; Watkins-Owens 1996, 2001). The vast majority of these studies were focused on adults.

Transnational and global perspectives have also received significant attention from researchers such as Linda Basch and Karen Fog Olwig, exploring the politics of national identity and global family networks respectively (Basch 2001; Olwig 2007). It is particularly useful for the purposes of this book to consider scholars who frame West Indian migration within the rubric of transnationalism but who focus on adults as the primary practitioners of transnational processes. There is a fine body of literature that fits into this category, and this study seeks to build on the valuable research done in this school. Linda Basch, who pioneered this school of thought, defines transnational social practices
as “the processes by which migrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch 2001: 118). “These relations,” she asserts, “occur along the lines of family, economic and political relations” (Basch 2001: 118). Basch’s research on Eastern Caribbean immigrants in Brooklyn, New York, reveals the complex ways in which adult immigrants remain politically active in their home and host countries, giving examples of New York residents who campaign for political candidates in the United States and then return to Grenada to run for political office (Basch 2001). Basch also cites immigrants who own property in Grenada and invest in businesses “back home” as examples of transnational actions. Significantly, all of these practices—owning property, maintaining dual residences, and running for political office—are activities from which youth are generally blocked due to age and financial dependency on adults. Therefore, transnationalism in Basch’s framework is articulated through activities that are typically open only to adults.

Most of the research on West Indians in the United States has focused on the eastern seaboard and on New York in particular; Percy Hintzen’s West Indian in the West: Self-Representation in an Immigrant Community is a noted exception (Hintzen 2001). Hintzen’s analysis, which compares the ways in which San Francisco Bay–area and New York City–based West Indians “publicize their collective presence in different geosocial locations,” shares components with She’s Mad Real (Hintzen 2001: 5). Focusing on “carnivals, sports events, clubs, restaurants, associations and other arenas of publicizing identity” Hintzen argues that “the social geography of New York produces a social identity of West Indianness that is different from that of California and shows how location shapes the ways in which identities are organized and understood” (Hintzen 2001: 5). While Hintzen similarly emphasizes the centrality of place in producing social and individual identities, all of his respondents were over the age of eighteen (Hintzen 2001: 6), in contrast to the youth in this book, most of whom were between the ages of twelve and seventeen when initially interviewed. Moreover, the present study emphasizes subjectivity formation within leisure and public consumption, rather than within “publicizing identity.”

**Considering Immigrant Youth**

Of course, not all West Indian migration scholars have neglected youth. Sociologist Mary Waters spearheaded a move to center attention on the children of immigrants with an impressive body of work. Waters has theorized
that first- and second-generation West Indian youths’ practices of identity formation can be placed in three categories: those who are “ethnic identified” and see a strong difference between themselves and Black Americans; those who are “American identified” and embrace many aspects of African American culture while downplaying their immigrant or ethnic identities; and those who are “immigrant identified,” youngsters who have migrated more recently and who stress their national place of birth in defining their identities (Waters 1999: 290–302). While she allows that these three paths are fluid identities and that individuals might assert more than one at the same time, because Waters’s research is centered around school and work, she is not privy to the dynamic ways in which first- and second-generation youth utilize consumer culture and leisure activities in creating more malleable transnational identities.

In describing her research and methodological approach Waters writes, “Because of the strong patterns of residential segregation in U.S. society, I believed that the workplace was the best site to capture the most diverse interactions the immigrants would have” (Waters 1999: 9). Waters interviewed fifty-nine adults and eighty-three adolescent and young-adult children of immigrants for her study (Waters 1999: 9). Including youth and adults from a range of class backgrounds, Waters also conducted participant observation in two public high schools. Using this carefully conceptualized methodological approach, Waters acquired a wealth of data on West Indian youth and avers, “Part of becoming American for these teens is to expect expensive consumer goods, such as fashionable clothes and jewelry, from parents (Waters 1999: 217). Additionally, she goes on to state, “So both the immigrant parental generation and the adolescents associate ‘becoming American’ with access to consumer goods and full participation in a materialist culture” (Waters 1999: 219). Waters acknowledges that West Indians negotiate becoming American within the consumer realm and that leisure culture plays a significant role in how they define themselves. Still, her references to consumer culture and to the specific ways in which youth utilize popular goods in “becoming American” are few and far between.

Waters has collaborated with Philip Kasinitz, and with John H. Mollenkopf and Jennifer Holdaway on two edited volumes devoted entirely to second-generation immigrant youth from a number of national backgrounds: *Becoming New Yorkers: Ethnographies of the New Second Generation* (2004) and *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age* (2008). The
former volume returns to the old mainstays of labor and school, while the later examines immigrant youth’s levels of success relative to those of native-born groups and compares achievement within and between these groups, measuring achievement in terms of education and participation in the labor force. In *Becoming New Yorkers*, Sherri-Ann Butterfield complicates Waters’ three-path framework for second-generation West Indian migration in ways that support the analysis in this book. She stresses the role of New York City as a landscape, asserts the importance of context for identity development, and argues that, within New York City, identity formation among West Indian and African Americans is bidirectional, with both groups influencing each other (Butterfield 2004: 290–291). Tellingly, Butterfield suggests that the fact that reggae music and Latin music can be heard alongside rap and pop in New York’s West Indian neighborhoods indicates that there is no one “black culture” (Butterfield 2004: 290). Still, while Butterfield recognizes New York City as a critical site for analysis, she neglects to theorize consumer space and youth culture as principal elements of West Indian New York. Even when respondents’ accounts are grounded in consumer spheres such as markets and hair salons, Butterfield’s attention is focused on schools and on categories such as gender, ethnicity, and race, and she shows little regard for how those categories come to be defined within leisure and consumption (Butterfield 2004).

The persistent trend even when youth are given specific attention has been to concentrate on labor and schools as the ideals sites of analysis, as in Nancy López’s excellent study of girls’ and boys’ varying levels of achievement in American schools (2003). All of this research reveals that more attention has been given to adults than to youth and that when youth are considered, as in the work of Waters, Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Holdaway, and López, schools and labor have been the “go to” sites, rather than consumer culture and leisure activities. Without a doubt, these studies reveal invaluable insights, and, certainly, the realms of work and school are critical loci of social and economic equality. However, the spheres of consumption and leisure are equally meaningful avenues for exposing social inequalities and parsing transnational youthful subjectivities, and it is regrettable that prevailing studies erect an artificial but absolute divide between the realms of work and leisure. Moreover, this seems to be an odd methodological and theoretical trend when we consider that consumer culture and leisure activities are paramount to how young people themselves conceptualize their identities.
Other Ways to Understand Youth Culture: Globalization and African Diasporic Belonging

Why were youth largely ignored until recently, and why is consumer culture not a focal point? We can find clues toward answering this query even in studies not explicitly centered on youth. The following passage from Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s pivotal work, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*, underscores youth experience as a potentially rich subject for analysis and demonstrates that a call for a youth culture–centered approach to West Indian transnationalism is applicable not only to the United States but also to the Caribbean diaspora in England and elsewhere. Brown’s insightful ethnography examines the complexities and contradictions of Black identity, drawing together many historical periods and bodies of literature. In the preface, Brown recounts her reasons for choosing Liverpool as a field site, relating that, when she arrived in Liverpool, one of her primary contacts took her to a Caribbean community center where she encountered a group of “kids,” averaging about thirteen years old. Brown writes:

I asked them a set of basic questions like, “Black people have been in this city for hundreds of years, so do you see yourselves as English?” The gist of the answer was “no.” That term refers to White people, they said, with far more flair than I can re-create here. I asked another question having something to do with Black identity. Waxing historical, one young girl quoted Malcolm X in her response. They answered my questions with ease and great interest—except for one. Everyone—adults and children—froze when I asked these kids whether they were of Caribbean background, and whether they consider themselves Afro-Caribbean. We were in a place called the Caribbean Centre, so I thought that an ethnicity question was called for. . . . I penetrated an open wound, as I learned later. After the interview, a couple of the kids approached me with a question of their own. Could I teach them some new dance steps from America? For all of the scientific reasons there were for choosing this city as a field site, it was these kids who made Liverpool irresistible. In view of the heavy political content of their answers, I surmised that their parents must be really interesting (Brown 2005: xi, emphasis in original).

Brown encountered a group of adolescents who quickly proved to be wonderful “informants”—wrestling with the very issues of Blackness and English
identity that she wished to interrogate. Still, while finding the adolescents to be “irresistible,” she opted to interview their parents. I gather that these youngsters shared Brooklyn teens’ reliance on youth culture as the language through which they articulated Caribbean diasporic identity. And their query about learning American dance moves speaks to an important point Brown herself goes on to analyze: the ways in which Caribbean peoples in both the United States and Great Britain formulate their identities in relation to American popular youth culture. Brown subsequently asks the question “Why Liverpool?” Why had she chosen Liverpool as a legitimate place to study Englishness? However, Brown’s preliminary findings also prompt us to ask, “Why adults? Why not youth and youth culture?” The youth Brown encountered quickly illustrated that they were grappling with how to reconcile Black, Afro-Caribbean, and British identities and that they had much to teach an anthropologist hoping to understand how racial and ethnic identity is socially constructed.

Analyses centered on youthful global and national identity formation have come not from scholars of West Indian migration but from researchers concerned with leisure and global youth cultures more generally. Dick Hebdige offered early contributions in this vein by analyzing the significance of reggae music and of the Rasta and Rude Boy cultures in both Jamaica and England in the mid- to late 1960s and early 1970s (Hebdige 1976). Hebdige illustrates how young members of the African diaspora in England, the United States, and the Caribbean created what are now referred to as transnational identities as they channeled Black popular music, Rastafarianism, and a Black consciousness constructed in opposition to White hegemony. These identity processes were defined largely within the realms of music and popular culture, but they had implications for education, employment, and intergenerational differences. Hebdige notes that the British West Indian youth “review[ed] his [sic] position with a more critical eye than his [sic] parents” and that the older generation was less willing to relinquish the idea that England “promised a golden future” even when their lived circumstances told them the contrary (Hebdige 1976: 151). Identity formation for British West Indian youth in the 1960s and 1970s, then, was embedded in notions of Black consciousness routed through Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, and England, and expressed through music and popular culture. For Hebdige, music and leisure culture were the primary sites in which British West Indian youth formed their identities. Referring to the emergent black consciousness, he writes:
These developments were translated into specifically Jamaican terms and the men of the dreadlocks began to make an incongruous and sinister appearance once more on the grey streets of the metropolis. By 1973, McGlashan could report the bizarre conjunction of Africa and Ealing at the West London Grand Rastafarian ball, where Rastas, twice removed from the mythical homeland yearned in unison for an end to “sufferation” as giggling white girls danced to the reggae. The cult of Ras Tafari appealed at least as strongly to the black youth of Great Britain as it did to their cousins in Jamaica. If anything it proved even more irresistible, giving the stranded Community at once a name and a future. . . . All this was reflected in and communicated through the music which had found in Britain an even larger and more avid audience than in its country of origin (Hebdige 1976: 151–152, emphasis added).

While scholars such as Hebdige and Stuart Hall relied on British and West Indian expressive youth cultures as legitimate sites of analysis, researchers focused on West Indian migration in the United States, as we have seen, have not followed in this tradition. Hebdige emerged from the Birmingham School, an approach that prioritized youth subcultures and leisure activities while being criticized for overstating resistance and for relying too heavily on class-based analyses. These legitimate criticisms aside, the youth-centered approach of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) laid the foundation for more contemporary studies focused on transnationalism and youth culture such as anthropologist Sunaina Maira’s Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City, which engages many of the theoretical and methodological points raised here (Maira 2002). Maira’s study of second-generation Indian American adolescents in New York City reveals the “constructedness and dynamism of ethnic identity but also suggests that Indian American youth use certain markers of what it means to be Indian in order to contest one another’s performances and narrations of ethnicity and to assert their own” (Maira 2002: 14). Rooted in the Desi party scene, a dance club subculture centered around bhangra remix music (Indian folk music mixed with American dance and hip-hop genres), Maira’s book explores youthful immigrant identities in New York City from her subjects’ perspectives and within a locus that holds meaning for the youth themselves. From this **emic** approach, Maira analyzes how “rhetorical gestures—of ethnic authenticity, of gendered innocence or sexual waywardness, of ritualized coolness—are linked to the particular insertion of Indian Americans into the racial and class structures of the nation-state and into the transnational flows.
of labor, capital, and media images in the late twentieth century” (Maira 2002: 15). Maira argues that traditionally critical arenas such as race and class structures, labor, capital, and transnational identity negotiations can and should be studied within the realms of leisure and consumption. She suggests that second-generation youth culture raises important questions about the relationships between immigrant communities and “the nation-state in which they live and the one ostensibly left behind” (Maira 2002: 21).

Maira lays the groundwork for the notion of “youthscapes” in this ethnography, a concept she and Elizabeth Soep develop further in the edited volume of the same name (Maira and Soep 2005). Borrowing from Arjun Appadurai’s notions of ethnoscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes, Maira and Soep argue that youthful social and material relationships are created within the global channeling of labor, capital, media images, and ideologies (Maira 2002: 21; Maira and Soep 2005). Maira and Soep conceptualize “local youth practices as embedded, both in obvious and unexpected ways, within the shifts in national and global forces marking the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (Maira and Soep 2005: xv). Youthscapes, then, are spheres that are at once political, geographical, temporal, and social (Maira and Soep 2005). After contending with the frameworks on which scholars have thus far relied to theorize cultural globalization—considering concepts such as “diaspora,” “transnationalism,” and “cosmopolitanism”—Maira and Soep resolve that the growing literature on globalization “while highly relevant to studies of youth . . . leaves key questions about an entire generation largely unanswered or in some cases, unconnected” (Maira and Soep 2005: xvii). I follow Maira and Soep in asking, “How can youth studies offer new models or methods for studying border politics and commodity cultures in an era of global capitalism and changing patterns of coerced and voluntary migration” (Maira and Soep 2005:xvii)? For these authors, studying youth culture unearths how social identities are fashioned and refashioned within transnational popular culture (Maira and Soep 2002: xvii–xviii).

_Bridging the Divide: From Childhood to Youth, between Play and Labor_

This book bridges the approaches of scholars who focus on contemporary youth culture and researchers who study West Indian transnationalism by recasting the divide between labor and leisure. En route to making these connections, I situate this study within the developing literature on the anthropology of children, childhood, and youth. Although West Indian migration
scholarship reflects a general neglect of children in the broader anthropological literature, recently, ethnographers have adjusted their gazes to consider the quotidian experiences of children as they relate to local/global economic systems and to the politics of culture (Cole and Durham 2007; Honwana and de Boeck 2005; James and Prout 1990; Lancy 2008; Montgomery 2009; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Schwartzman 2001; Stephens 1995). In fact, a consideration of anthropological research on childhood and globalization offers an effective on-ramp for merging youth culture studies with West Indian transnationalism research. While the increasingly rapid global movement of people, commodities, and ideas has influenced how children around the world imagine and experience growing up, globalization has also “sharpen[ed] the sense of exclusion and marginality among people who cannot acquire those goods” (Cole and Durham 2007: 4). And anthropologists are progressively more in tune with the global disparities in how childhood is socially constructed and with how ever-increasing migration affects children’s lived realities (Cole and Durham 2007; Honwana and de Boeck 2005; Katz 2004; LeVine and New 2008). When ethnographers began field explorations of childhood in the 1920s, studies described the differing lives of children where there were no schools (LeVine and New 2008: 1). However, even after the introduction of Western schooling, and continuing today, the majority of the world’s children, located in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific, begin working at early ages and share in the responsibilities of caring for themselves and siblings and of obtaining food and water (LeVine and New 2008: 1–7). Cross-cultural childhood researchers have noted, for example, that in Malawi and the Niger Delta, it is not uncommon for five-year-olds to sleep in separate dwellings from their mothers, to start skill training, and to learn to bathe themselves (Rogoff et al., in LeVine and New 2008). Children experience similarly early incorporations into the work world in the Caribbean, where (to borrow a section heading from LeVine and New), the lines of “work, play, participation and learning” are blurred from an early age (LeVine and New 2008). Anthropologists drawing on case studies of child-rearing practices in low-income homes in Kingston, Jamaica, describe children whose entry into domestic labor stands in marked contrast to middle-class American norms:

At the age of four or five, children of both sexes begin doing household chores, such as sweeping, mopping, floor polishing, and caretaking for younger children. Chantelle, age seven, watched her toddler and infant siblings, did light laundry and some cooking, and ran errands (Sargent and Harris 1998: 206).
Similarly, in rural Guyanese villages, it is common for children as young as five to play significant roles in family farming, in the care of younger siblings, and in domestic chores. Although childhood researchers note that early exposure to work is part of “normal” development for most of the world’s children, increasingly the changes accompanying global economic restructuring have diminished local resources, transforming family life and further recasting the divide between work and play for children. Within this schema, tourism enables the state “to circumscribe boundaries around the nation while servicing imperialism,” and “girls as young as seven work in the [Bahamian] Straw Market, offering songs to tourists in exchange for twenty-five cents” (Alexander 2005: 61). Girls, in particular, bear increasing burdens in countries such as the Sudan, where they must fetch water and wood, shouldering ever-widening responsibilities to help their mothers with household tasks and preventing them from attending school (Katz 2004: 7). Media coverage of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti sparked discussion about the suffering of Haitian children—the majority of whom lived in poverty even before the earthquake—with news reports giving special attention to Restavek children, youngsters sold or given away to a life of indentured labor in Port-au-Prince because their poor, rural parents could not afford to care for them.

Scholars of the anthropology of childhood have problematized child rights issues outside Europe and North America by juxtaposing such examples with troublesome evidence of “hurried child” syndrome in the United States and Japan, where youngsters are “overburdened with demands to assume ever higher levels of competency and more and more skills at an ever earlier age” (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998: 12). Still, “the cherished myth of child-centeredness” flourishes in contemporary Western societies, where children and adolescents are thought of as being free from the pressures of working, paying bills, saving money, and managing finances (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998: 10). Such concerns are thought of as the exclusive domain of adults. Sherri-Ann Butterfield illustrates this point when she explains her methodological choice to limit her study to second-generation West Indians between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-two. Butterfield writes, “The men and women in this age bracket had come into full adulthood and were experiencing socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages, since they were now primarily responsible for their own lives” (Butterfield 2004: 291). Butterfield suggests that persons under the age of twenty-two do not “experience socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages.” She’s Mad Real complicates this approach. Readers will learn not only about how West Indian
youth formulate their identities in relation to consumer culture but also about how they and their African American peers earn money. The teenagers with whom I worked held one, two, and sometimes three jobs. As noted earlier, Nadine, for example, had been separated from her mother and had been living with her best friend’s family for almost a year, and China was looking for a third job, one that would provide health insurance benefits. These teens purchased almost all of the consumer goods they enjoyed, including cell phones, iPods, and the hallmark of black teenagers’ “predatory consumption”—sneakers—with their own hard-earned money (Chin 2001). But they also used that money to save for college and to help buy food.

Play-Labor

Robin Kelley’s concept of play-labor, mentioned earlier, which astutely “challenges the way in which work and leisure have been dichotomized in studies of the U.S. working class,” provides an apt if incomplete framework for elaborating how the teens in this study approach labor and leisure (Kelley 1997: 45). As much as this book draws on a tradition of youth culture studies emanating from the Birmingham School, these scholars theorized leisure as the opposite of work. Leisure was defined as taking place at night, on the weekends, and after hours, while “work” was done on the clock, in exchange for wages and in separate spaces (Kelley 1997: 45). For the teens in this study, however, an afterschool internship at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, for which they received either minimum wages and/or service learning credits from their high schools, served as a site of play-labor. Yet, we will see that their acts of play-labor are both similar to and distinct from the working-class and underclass underground economies of which Kelley writes. Play-labor for these teens is legal and adult sanctioned, yet often framed in response to institutionalized discrimination and racial spatialization. As Black adolescents who practice play-labor in a museum, an institution commonly perceived as elitist (Hodges 1978), these teens’ actions can be seen as transgressive. They claim the Brooklyn Children’s Museum as “their museum” in response to global economic restructuring, urban “development,” the policing of inner-city streets, and the social barriers that accompany gentrification, which have left them with few safe public spaces in which to engage in play. Especially for teens coming from “respectable” West Indian households, the city streets are viewed as dangerous places where even “good kids” are subject to police harassment and
violent crime. This concern, coupled with the ever-rising criteria for college admission and the hyperscheduling of children and adolescents of all ethnicities, has meant that play-labor has become increasingly structured and organized.

Play-labor also served as an avenue to forming West Indian youths’ subjectivities. As museum workers, the teens engaged in the labor of imparting knowledge about the natural sciences and about cultural diversity to younger peers. This form of work enabled them to position themselves as experts and owners of the museum space. Formulating their identities within a museum also imbued an acute sense of cultural identity. They were constantly being encouraged by museum educators to “expand their horizons” by learning about other ethnic groups and by visiting other museums. This meant that the teens’ engagements with transnational popular culture were set against a backdrop of explicit cultural production.

**Music and African Diasporic Youth Culture**

Within this context, music constantly reemerged as the primary vehicle by which West Indian teens asserted their West Indianness, while either distancing themselves from or allying themselves with African Americanness. Stuart Hall has theorized that Caribbean identities are always constituted within, not outside, representation (Hall 1990: 222). While, in this instance, Hall was writing about how Caribbean identities are represented in film, his notion of identity as “not as transparent and unproblematic as we think” and as “a production which is never complete” is perhaps best exemplified in the ways in which West Indian youth negotiate transnational racial, gender, and ethnic identities in relation to popular consumer culture (Hall 1990). The hybrid nature of Black diasporic identity as theorized by Stuart Hall has influenced researchers such as Paul Gilroy, who situates his conceptualization of a Black Atlantic culture—shaped more by common routes than by common roots—within the realms of music and popular culture (Gilroy 1993). Gilroy echoes Hall’s framework and highlights Black music as rich with questions of racialized belonging, authenticity, and nationalism. And there is perhaps no site within popular youth culture as laden with questions of authenticity, national discourses, and gender inequality as hip-hop.

Youthful subjectivities in and around the production of music have served as a point of departure for a number of critical works analyzing global youth cultures. George Lipsitz has explored identity construction in the production
of musical fusions including bhangra, Algerian rai, and Puerto Rican bulgalu (Lipsitz 1994). Other studies that can inform West Indian migration research by taking us beyond the old West Indian/African American comparative framework include Juan Flores’s examination of the intricate commonalities and specificities of Puerto Rican and Latino immigrant identity (Flores 2000); Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal’s attention to African diasporic subjectivities and racial authenticity vis-à-vis hip-hop culture (Forman 2004, 2005; Neal 2004); Raymond Codrington and Rupa Huq’s analyses of race, place, and postcolonial identity among Europe’s African, Caribbean, and Asian immigrant hip-hop-based youth cultures (Codrington 2006; Huq 2006); Abdoulaye Niang’s interrogations of the politics of hip-hop culture in African cities (Niang 2006); and Marc Perry’s theorizations of hip-hop as a global Black “space” in which diasporic Blackness is creatively self-fashioned (Perry 2008). Perry’s work is particularly relevant, as he argues that hip-hop is the most disseminated global image of Blackness and that Black youth use hip-hop to create notions of self that contest and resist being bound within national subjectivities (Perry 2008).

She’s Mad Real draws upon these approaches and those of scholars who explore the intersection of race and gender in African diasporic youth cultures. Work of this ilk, by scholars such as Angela McRobbie, Tracey Skelton, Donna Hope, and Sonjah Stanley-Niaah, has investigated transnational music and leisure cultures as complex and contested sites for the construction of African diasporic femininities (Hope 2006; McRobbie 1999; Skelton 1996; Stanley-Niaah 2009). A common tension throughout all of the studies concerned with diasporic subjectivities emerges from an attempt to gauge how youth around the globe create specific, locally derived identities while simultaneously being influenced by and influencing a “homogenous” global youth culture writ large (Nilan and Feixa 2006). While many fear that a homogenous global youth culture reflective of American (or Western) imperialism is eclipsing local expressive and material cultures, some scholars have posited that African American hip-hop has come to embody the hegemonic African diasporic youth culture (Thomas and Campt 2007).

I am suggesting that closer attention to youth culture in general and hip-hop in particular can help anthropology. How can hip-hop help anthropology? Hip-hop provides us with a gateway to previously undertheorized West Indian subjectivities within heretofore neglected contexts. Waters, Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Holdaway, and López’s growing attention to the second generation is a signal that, increasingly, the children of immigrants will take cen-
ter stage in our investigations of how immigrant groups negotiate national, racial, and ethnic identities. But we have little hope of ethnographically grounding the ways in which youth are key players in defining Blackness and in negotiating racialized and transnationally situated notions of belonging if we continue to ignore what for them is perhaps the most consequential sphere for the social construction of identities.

**Urban Youth “At Risk”**

Beyond the immigration research, much of the literature on urban youth of color focuses on teens “at risk” for social, psychological, and physical problems such as teen pregnancy, participation in gangs and violent crime, drug use, obesity, acquiring HIV/AIDS, sexual assault, rape, and various forms of domestic violence. These are legitimate problems that face urban teenagers. Jody Miller has written compellingly about the ways in which sexual harassment, sexual assault, and gang rape shape the experiences of African American young women in severely disadvantaged communities (J. Miller 2008). Miller “investigate[s] how the structural inequalities that create extreme—and racialized—urban poverty facilitate both cultural adaptations and social contexts that heighten and shape the tremendous gender-based violence faced by urban African American girls” (J. Miller 2008: 3). She underscores how extreme poverty and race and class inequalities, in conjunction with urban space, have made routine sexual violence a reality for urban Black girls and women. While most of the young women in *She’s Mad Real* come from working-class families and some come from homes where incomes dipped below the poverty level, for the most part the core group of teens with whom I worked did not hail from extremely impoverished households. Participation in afterschool programs such as BCM and the Flatbush YMCA, the limited availability of community resources, and the watchful eyes of concerned mothers shielded the girls in this study from experiencing the systemic gender-based violence detailed by Miller. Still, as evidenced in the one case of sexual harassment I did encounter, and given that victims of such crimes are often reluctant to discuss their experiences, the girls in this study were certainly not immune to these problems.

The harsh realities of problems faced by urban minority youth notwithstanding, a growing number of scholars have begun to expose the ways in which being labeled as “at risk” pathologizes these youth. This book illustrates how such essentializing public policy and social science discourse limits our understandings of the diverse, real-life experiences of urban ado-
lescents. The West Indian and African American youth in this study were “good kids,” a label their parents and educators adamantly repeated time and again, signaling a desire to distance their young charges from the “at-risk” categorization that has pathologized teens like them in educational and public policy discourses. While these predominantly working-class teens experienced the disenfranchisement and isolation that went along with living in minority neighborhoods and felt the effects of high youth unemployment, most of them graduated from high school and went on to four-year colleges. Although I learned about a few girls who got pregnant, none of my primary contacts in this study became teenage mothers. These teens did, however, have an acute awareness of the ways in which “at-risk” discourses stereotype their identities and explicitly urged me to write a book that presents their true experiences.

As I conducted my research and shared my findings at conferences and other public lectures, I began to realize that audiences, whether they were scholarly or otherwise, expected me to recount horror stories of the sort popularized on talk shows. I was expected to share explicit details of victimized youth who sold drugs, got pregnant, were arrested, dropped out of school, were physically abused by parents, and lived in squalor conditions. On one occasion, when I interviewed for a position at a college in the New York tri-state area, after giving my job-talk (a formal lecture that accompanies an academic job interview), I was pulled aside by a tenured faculty member who suggested that my work was “not political.” When I asked him what he meant, he recounted an experience he had while visiting a family’s home in the field: “These two children sat at their kitchen table and squashed roaches with the palms of their hands, for fun. It was a game for them.” He waited expectantly, his eyes wide and beseeching, for me to offer an equally dramatic anecdote. I had none. I gathered that, in his mind, research on the hardships of poverty was more “political” than studies focused on working-class youths’ consumer and leisure culture. I realized then that either my sources were exceptions or scholarly discourses had been overwhelmingly influenced by representations of urban minority youth as pathological, socially abnormal, or completely victimized by abject poverty and catastrophic social inequality. Make no mistake, the teens I studied experienced social inequalities. The fact that they also voluntarily hung out at a museum after school should not preclude us from hearing their stories. Listening to hip-hop and frequenting museums do not fit neatly together in our popular understandings of urban youth. However, the teens in this book did both.
Dispelling the Model Minority Myth

In writing a book about West Indian and African American girls who frequent a museum, who do well at school, and who “stay off the streets,” I run the risk of having readers conclude that the teens in this study are “model minorities.” I would like to end such considerations here. This book speaks to the diversity of urban Black girls’ experiences. It does not suggest that West Indians are inherently better workers or students than their African American peers, nor does it suggest that they negotiate consumer culture in a less threatening way. The greater educational success of foreign-born Blacks has sparked debates about whether they deserve to take advantage of affirmative action programs designed to even the playing fields for descendants of slaves. However, studies focused on how West Indian households earn higher incomes and on how these immigrants measure their economic success relative to African Americans have found that the “West Indian success story” is complicated and contradictory (Model 1995; Waters 1999).

The idea that West Indians and other “voluntary minorities” have a different approach or “cultural orientation” to life in America because they entered this country voluntarily, differentiating them from “involuntary minorities” such as African Americans, and that this distinct “culture” enables them to achieve greater educational and financial success, has been interrogated in West Indian migration studies (Ogbu 1990; Waters 1999). Waters has argued that, in fact, structural differences such as the availability of social networks, immigrant status, and “a different metric for judging a job” all facilitate hiring of West Indian immigrants (Waters 1999: 140). In other words, these differences are race-neutral and do not imply cultural values distinct from those of other groups, including African Americans (Waters 1999: 140). These differences are, however, often stereotyped with cultural explanations (Hintzen 2001: 94–95; Waters 1999: 140).

A recent, important study conducted by sociologist Douglass Massey and his colleagues at Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania has sought to frame these structural explanations alongside extensive data on foreign-born Black “success” in terms of college admissions (Massey et al. 2007). Brief attention to this study here will allow us to situate the teens’ negotiations of African American and West Indian stereotypes presented in this book against structural explanations. Qualitative research has revealed that Black immigrants do better than African Americans in terms of education, income, and residential segregation (Massey et al. 2007: 247). With regard to education, noted migration scholars Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut found
that foreign-born Blacks have greater success than native blacks (Portes and Rumbaut 1990, 2001, in Massey et al. 2007: 245). In addition to the structural explanations offered by Waters, if we look at the massive immigration of Afro-Caribbeans to the United States after 1965, when immigration restrictions were loosened, we see that the majority of those who came were from the skilled middle class, rather than from a cross-section of West Indian populations (Massey et al. 2007: 246). Jamaicans, for example, who represent the largest Afro-Caribbean group in the country and who also constituted the largest group among the teens at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, are “the most class selective of all immigrant streams, and second-generation Jamaican immigrants perform very favorably compared with Black natives across a range of social and economic outcomes in the United States” (Massey et al. 2007: 246; Butcher 1994). Thus, many of those Jamaicans who emigrate arrive with greater occupational and educational capital but are subsequently compared to the general African American population.

According to the Princeton/University of Pennsylvania study, 40 percent of Black students at Ivy League colleges are either first- or second-generation immigrants (Massey et al. 2007). This issue surfaced during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign, sparking debates about whether we could speak about a “singular Black experience” when it appeared that African and Caribbean immigrant Blacks were outperforming African Americans. Citing Massey et al., The Wall Street Journal reported:

Black immigrants, on the whole, fare far better economically than native-born blacks. A quarter of foreign-born blacks have bachelor’s degrees, vs. 16% of those born in America . . . The median income for African-immigrant households is over $45,000, vs. $41,000 for black Caribbean-immigrant households and just under $36,000 for U.S.-born black households. Black immigrant children are more likely than native-born black children to be raised in two-parent homes (Kaufman and Fields 2008: A1).

Massey et al. presented their study’s thrust in an article titled “Black Immigrants and Natives Attending Selective Colleges and Universities in the United States.” Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman (NLSF), the article offers numerous insights into the overrepresentation of Black immigrant children, especially in highly selective colleges and universities. The researchers concluded that Black immigrant children are overrepresented because they are more desirable candidates to college admissions officers (because of factors such as having higher SAT scores,
having attended private schools in greater numbers or having higher high school GPAs or because they have better “soft skills,” such as feeling more comfortable with Whites) and thus are admitted to highly selective colleges at a significantly higher rate than native-born African Americans. Tellingly, the study found no significant differences in socioeconomic factors such as family income. There were minor differences in the percentage that came from two-parent households, with immigrants being slightly more likely to come from such households. Still, perhaps not surprisingly, statistics on the comparative economic and social successes of Black immigrants and African Americans do not paint the complete picture. The phrasing of The Wall Street Journal article quoted, for example, seems to overemphasize these small differences. There were also some experiential differences; the researchers found that native Black students experienced greater levels of violence and tended to live in segregated neighborhoods more than their immigrant peers. Also, immigrant fathers tended to have higher educational degrees than native-born fathers. But, significantly, once they entered college, there was no real difference in performance between native-born and foreign-born Blacks, while White students tended to achieve higher grades than both immigrant and native-born Blacks.

Massey et al. position their findings against a controversial moment in 2004 involving prominent African American scholars Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Lani Guinier:

[They] pointed out at a reunion of black Harvard alumni that a majority of those present were of West Indian or African origin, not the descendants of African American slaves. They argued that children from black families in the country for generations were being left behind in the competition for elite education. According to Gates, “I just want people to be honest enough to talk about it” (Massey et al. 2007: 246; Rimer and Arenson 2004).

The authors cite this moment as the catalyst for controversies surrounding the overrepresentation of foreign-born Blacks in elite higher education. If the way it was summarized in The Wall Street Journal article is any indication, however, Massey et al.’s incisive findings, which are meant to inform this debate, have not translated into popular understandings. Popular views continue to overemphasize foreign-born Blacks’ success, as evidenced in the discourses during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in which commentators debated whether or not Obama’s African father and educational
achievements differentiated the candidate from African Americans. These controversies run the risk of misconstruing the success of foreign-born Blacks. It should be noted that the youth with whom I conducted research experienced high levels of college admission. In focusing on West Indian and African American youth mixing in a play-labor/educational setting, this book seeks to shed light on subtle but crucial cultural practices ignored in the popular debates. Massey et al. concede that one limitation of their research is that it studies the college selection process after the fact and thus it cannot speak to, among other things, how unconscious stereotyping might influence college admissions officers (Massey et al. 2007: 252). This book explores cultural and racial stereotypes and directly addresses how Black teens comprehend and position their identities in relation to such stereotypes. It also complicates hard divides between “immigrant” and “native” Blacks because a number of the youth described here have both African American and West Indian parentage and because West Indian and African American identity formation is a bidirectional process that draws on both ethnic traditions, as evidenced in the increasingly blurred lines between hip-hop and West Indian dancehall music.

The Study

*She’s Mad Real* delves into how first- and second-generation West Indian girls make sense of themselves within the contexts of leisure activities and consumer culture. Spanning over a decade, it draws on a number of methodologies and materials including in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and analyses of youth representations in educational policies, local and national newspapers and Internet blogs. My fieldwork began in 1997 with a participant observation study of a group of cheerleaders at the Flatbush YMCA in Brooklyn, New York, and continued with a group of teens enrolled in an afterschool program at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum (BCM) in Crown Heights. From 1997 to 1999, I lived one block away from the YMCA in an apartment building where two of the girls in this study also resided. At the YMCA, I interviewed thirty cheerleaders who cheered for the Y’s basketball team. Of these girls, twenty-five were of West Indian descent, with at least one parent coming from the Anglophone Caribbean; three were African Americans, and two were Latinas. At BCM, I initially interviewed eighteen girls, all of whom were West Indian. During the early period of my research, all of the girls were between the ages of twelve and seventeen. I returned to both fieldsites in 2000 and 2002 for several months of fieldwork. Between
2005 and 2006, I returned to the field again, this time focusing my research at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. I conducted one-on-one interviews with at least fifteen more girls and engaged in participant observation with the Museum Team afterschool program, in which between thirty and thirty-five teens participated. And, in 2007 and 2008, I reconnected with a number of young women who are now college students and whom I first met in 2005, when they were teenagers participating in BCM's Museum Team program.

The ethnographic material presented here draws primarily from work with BCM youth and relies most heavily on fieldwork conducted after 2005. While my study ostensibly focused on girls from the English-speaking Caribbean, the fieldwork offers insight into the ways in which African American girls and boys influence and are influenced by their West Indian peers of both genders. I spent countless hours with these teens, participating in their activities at the museum (which included leading tours, feeding animals, tutoring younger children, studying for the SATs, designing costumes, and making a book about what it means to be West Indian and Black), accompanying them on trips around New York City, attending spoken word poetry and hip-hop concerts with them, going to the movies, shopping, and frequenting local eateries. During periods when my work as a professor kept me from the field, I corresponded with a core group of girls and BCM educators via e-mail and phone conversations. While I conducted recorded interviews with more than sixty girls, this study focuses on a smaller core group of teens. I became deeply invested in the lives of the girls you will meet here; I lost sleep the night before their prom and again when China and Nadine planned to forgo college and instead move into a housing project after graduating from high school. Some of them confided fears about going to college, worries about strained relationships with their mothers, and deep concerns about body image only after they had graduated from high school and left the BCM program.

Throughout all of this fieldwork, I found that while of course the realms of school and labor were critical to how the teens formulated their gender and ethnic identities, the lines between play and work were in fact amorphous, and it was within the sphere of popular and consumer culture that the fiercest battles were fought over staking simultaneous claims to West Indianness and African Americanness. Their ideas about African American culture, about when and if they should ally themselves with African Americans and about what represented respectable femininity, were more often than not communicated within the parlance of popular youth culture.

West Indian youth used hip-hop music and culture in particular as an arena within which they developed racialized, gendered, and ethnic identi-
ties in relation to their African American peers. As Butterfield has argued, this was not always an either/or choice between identifying as West Indian or as African American but was rather a complex bidirectional process whereby African American and West Indian youth constructed racial and ethnic subjectivities conjointly and based on social settings (Butterfield 2004:291). When they wished to assert a separate West Indian ethnic identity, West Indian girls voiced their preferences for Caribbean musical artists such as Spragga Benz and Lady Saw. However, when they wanted to demonstrate their fluency in the latest American popular culture, they sang along with and knew all of the words to the latest chart-topping American hip-hop song. And, as their interactions at BCM illustrate, everyday activities involved complex cultural negotiations in which, sometimes, an either/or choice seemed necessary.

**A Methodology for Studying Urban Youth**

What are the particular methodological problems involved with conducting urban ethnographic fieldwork with adolescents? While most of her subjects were college-age and most of mine were still in high school, Sunaina Maira's work is useful here (Maira 2002; Maira and Soep 2005). In her volume coedited with Elizabeth Soep, Maira positions “youthscapes” as both a conceptual and a methodological tool. This term highlights the degree to which research with children and youth is different from research focused on adults. Adolescents are, in some respects, much less willing to speak freely and at length than adults, and issues of power and authority color the dynamics between anthropologist and interviewee in particular ways when the researcher is an adult and the subject is an adolescent. A host of researchers have delved into the particular methodological concerns attached to studying children and youth (Bennett, Cieslik, and Miles 2003; Best 2007; Christensen and James 2000; Fine and Sandstrom 1998; Fraser et al. 2004; Graue and Walsh 1998; Holmes 1998; Waksler 1991). Following these scholars, I was acutely aware of my positionality and of the need to respectfully employ the authority that went along with my status as an adult. As Maira and Soep and Best have noted, however, it is only recently that researchers have began to fully engage with the growing population of immigrant youth in America. Studying urban immigrant youth presents unique methodological challenges. Well aware of discourses that frame them as “at risk,” such youth are at times reluctant to trust outsiders seeking to write about them. Urban dwellers in general can be less willing to invite strangers into their homes, and immigrants in particu-
lar are protective of their domestic environments. Teenagers, for whom the pursuit of “cool” is an all-consuming goal, are generally not inclined to share details about family economic hardships. For all of these reasons, the material presented here was gathered over the course of a decade during which I was able to gain the trust of a core group of girls. I situated my fieldwork within public settings, first a YMCA and later a museum, because I initially felt I could more readily gain access to these settings than to youths’ homes. However, after spending years and countless hours at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, I found that for many teens the museum was home. And consumer culture emerged as the one realm about which teens were always eager to speak. In a number of ways, this book’s methodological approach follows the tenets of New Childhood Studies, which aims to reframe adult-centered research and to represent children and youth as more than incomplete “others” in order to “provid[e] a more complex portrait of young people as meaningfully engaged, independent social actors whose activities and practices influence a variety of social contexts and settings” (Best 2007: 10).

Issues of age, class, ethnicity, race, geographic sites, and positionality (mine and the teens’) make mine an uncommon ethnographic study. The fact that I was born in Guyana and moved to Flatbush when I was nearly eight years old, spending the remainder of my childhood and adolescence there, proved to be an advantage with the teens. However, when I began my initial fieldwork, in 1997, I was a Ph.D. student at Harvard, a boon with parents and educators but not exactly a point of popularity with my original group of interviewees, teenage cheerleaders at the Flatbush YMCA. In the more recent period of fieldwork, I found that my status as a college professor was a plus with the college-bound BCM teens, who relied on me for advice about selecting schools. As much as for college advising though, the girls turned to me for hair-styling and hair-care tips and for advice on how to handle overprotective mothers. Throughout my fieldwork, personal knowledge of West Indian parenting practices tempered the degree to which I pressed girls to reveal information that might get them in trouble with their mothers. Knowing that I was also interviewing many of their mothers, the West Indian cheerleaders interviewed at the Flatbush YCMA all denied having boyfriends. They were reluctant to talk about relationships, dating, and sex because they feared I would share this information with mothers. When I refocused the research around adolescents at BCM, a program where teens’ parents were not present on a regular basis and one in which I spoke almost exclusively with youth and their afterschool educators, the girls were much more forthcoming about their intimate relationships.
**Working with Youth**

In focusing on West Indian adolescent girls, I share a primary goal with sociologist Amy L. Best, who calls for:

> a serious dialogue about what might be considered the methodological, ethical, practical, and conceptual boundaries for a more critical youth studies that is attentive to the changing social realities of youth and children as they come of age in a historical moment mediated by advanced communication systems and increasingly sophisticated media, economic change, and deepening inequalities (Best 2007: 5–6).

While my nationality, ethnicity, and gender may have influenced the girls to identify with me, as an adult I remained conscious of how my age and professional status granted me greater power and authority. Power imbalances are present even when the researcher is a native anthropologist. The fact that I was barely out of my twenties when I began the research that partially informs this study helped reduce the divide between my subjects and me. Yet, I carefully and continuously renegotiated my insider/outsider status while researching this book. Scholars engaged in critical youth studies have become increasingly concerned with reducing the power imbalance between researcher and researched and with conducting nonexploitative research (Best 2007: 7). To this end, years of repeated fieldwork served me better than pressing for answers teenage girls were uncomfortable providing.

Youth researchers have increasingly sought to amplify children's voices, privilege their perspectives, and include them in the processes through which knowledge about them is created by designing collaborative or participatory research protocols (Best 2007; Cahill 2007a; Chin 2007; Fleetwood 2005). Discussing the problems with utilizing traditional anthropological methods to study children and advocating for children as native anthropologists, Elizabeth Chin writes:

> The researched are often disenfranchised by a research process that excludes their active participation because they are understood as uninformed or uninitiated. Children, because they are widely thought to be developmentally incapable of really understanding the complexities of research, are further disenfranchised. Children are generally understood to be beneficiaries of the knowledge produced by the experts that later “helps” them somehow (Chin 2007: 274).
The material presented in these pages reflects more than answers to questions I asked or descriptions of observations I made. Especially with regard to popular culture, this book highlights questions the youth themselves raised. Since BCM’s Museum Team program is an afterschool program with its own innovative pedagogical approaches, in many instances the youth were prompted not by me but by their educators to participate in the processes of (re)presenting West Indian and African American identity. Therefore it was not up to me as the “professional anthropologist” to create a collaborative protocol. As museum interns, the youth understood themselves as “culture experts,” facilitating my aim to reveal them as “agents of knowledge about their own lives” (Best 2007: 15). For my part, I conducted a few workshops at BCM, introducing the teens to anthropological definitions of “race.” And, as mentioned, I offered my services as a college adviser. I was surprised to learn that, after I completed my fieldwork, some of the questions I had raised about cultural production and the politics of representation influenced BCM educators to guide the teens in writing an ethnography about life in their Brooklyn neighborhoods. However, for the most part, I ascertained that any “help” I offered the BCM teens and their educators was positioned against a history of adults and outsiders telling them what to do. We explore the politics of help in the Conclusion. Perhaps motivated equally by a desire to control how they were represented and by the hope of becoming celebrities (my repeated attempts to explain that anthropological books had little hope of landing in Oprah’s Book Club went unheard), the teens in this study, more than anything else, wanted me to finish the book about them.

A Note on Terms

I refrain in this book from using the word “kids” to refer to my adolescent respondents, opting instead for terms such as “youth,” “teens,” “teenagers,” and “adolescents.” The teens objected to being called “kids,” and both their BCM educators and I honored this request by calling them “teens.” The teens did not object to being called “girls,” and so I employ this term, in addition to referring to them as “young women.” The professionals who taught BCM youth are referred to by their moniker of choice, “educators.” Throughout the text, there is also a conscious effort to refrain from using “informant,” the traditional anthropological term for the people who share their experiences with ethnographers. Particularly because the youth in this study were suspicious of outsiders who routinely stereotyped their cultural norms and behaviors, I felt that “informant” connoted a relationship that was not true to the
rapport I shared with the teens. Instead, I refer to the people, adult and youth alike, who shared their lives with me as “interviewees,” although this term is also lacking in that it connotes the interlocutory relationships of journalism, not ethnography. “Interviewees,” therefore, should be understood here not as people with whom I consulted briefly but as individuals with whom I shared many ethnographic encounters, including formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and, in some cases, friendships that continued for the duration of my research and beyond. “West Indian” refers to immigrants from the Anglophone Caribbean and their American-born children, “African American” refers to descendants of African slaves who have lived in the United States for generations, and “Black” refers to the broader members of the African diaspora, although this term is problematized by the West Indian teens who sometimes identified as “Black” and other times used Black to mean “African American.” Last, whenever possible, I have specified interviewees’ particular national origins (i.e., Jamaican, Trinidadian, Guyanese). Asserting specific national origins is a situational practice; immigrants tend to refer to themselves as “West Indians” when they are in the company of Americans but specify their national origins when they are with other West Indians. Although this was sometimes true for the teens, I also found that they formed close friendships with youth from other Caribbean nations and bonded over shared West Indian social practices.

**Overview of the Chapters**

In the following chapters, popular youth culture and public play-labor activities serve as the central entry points for understanding how Brooklyn’s West Indian teenage girls and their African American peers articulate gender and racial identities. Chapter 2 presents an ethnographic mapping of the youngsters’ journeys within and beyond the confines of the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, placing West Indian immigrant youth within the racial and gender-based obstacles Black teens must traverse as they navigate New York City. Outings to a Barnes and Noble bookstore, a McDonald’s restaurant and a movie theater, along with the teens’ uses of cellular phones emerge as conflict-ridden sites. The chapter addresses the prominent role of consumer culture in shaping the lives of these urban dwellers and interprets the youths’ extracurricular activities in and around BCM as spatializing forces that help to construct transnational racial and gender identities. Arguing that BCM is a gendered and racialized space, one in which adolescents experience the contradictions of safety and control, it explores how girls outperform boys
in the internship program and relates this achievement to larger trends in educational gender disparity among urban minority youth and to Caribbean child-rearing practices. Chapter 3 uses an evening at a hip-hop concert as a springboard to interrogate the common view that hip-hop culture is largely constituted in misogyny, rampant consumerism, and male violence. West Indian girls pursue a symbolic “dual citizenship” as they construct their subjectivities and negotiate dialectic notions of authenticity within hip-hop culture. The girls voice strong preferences for female hip-hop artists and television personalities whom they define as “real.” We explore their conceptualizations of authenticity and complicate their frameworks by examining the contradictory ways in which cheerleaders at the Flatbush YMCA and youth at BCM interpret American hip-hop and West Indian dancehall music. Although the mainstream versions of both genres rely on sexually explicit lyrical content and debasing portrayals of women, West Indian girls and their mothers apply a double standard, seeing hip-hop as corruptive and dancehall as “positive.” I suggest that these contradictions speak to the ways in which Black consumer culture has been demonized in American society and offer my ethnographic material as a counter to popular ideas about the “breakdown” of the Black family. Chapter 4 analyzes the teens’ conceptualizations of racial identity, obesity, and body image, and gendered definitions of beauty as they surface in a group conversation about a popular television program. Here, a fast-paced focus group discussion among boys and girls situates the youth as critical consumers of popular culture who cross-examine long-held stereotypes about Black female sexuality. The teens sound off on a variety of topics in this chapter, including the use of West Indian accents as opposed to African American vernacular, religiosity, homophobia in West Indian and African American communities, and representations of Blackness on reality TV programs. We contemplate these issues as they relate to notions of Black beauty and to public “role models” such as the model and TV producer Tyra Banks and First Lady Michelle Obama. Finally, chapter 5 connects the insights of the previous chapters, emphasizing the linkages that tie together spatialized definitions of race and gender, the concept of “authenticity,” and the creation of transnational, youthful West Indian subjectivities. In the Conclusion, we consider how West Indian notions of success are gendered and generational, as I interrogate my own attempts to “help” the girls. I reflect on the degree to which West Indian girls’ bold critiques and strategic identity assertions translate into real-life opportunities for social empowerment and economic success in the shadow of a museum threatened by economic restructuring and gentrification. I grapple with the
choices, both grim and hopeful, these young women face as they transition into womanhood and into becoming Americans.

This book takes girls and young women’s uses of and views on popular youth culture seriously. For adolescent girls in general and Black girls in particular, popular youth culture, constituted of daily activities such as watching television, talking on cell phones, and listening to hip-hop, has either been dismissed as trivial or judged as corrupt. By placing the actual voices of young girls at the center of this analysis, I present a much-needed correction to the general literature on adolescent identity formation and to scholarship that explores the influences of contemporary consumer culture on young women and girls. I challenge prevailing analyses that invoke images of passive girls, incapable of deciphering the misogynous, materialistic, and unrealistic definitions of femininity offered in today’s omnipresent mass-mediated youth culture. Keen attention to the meanings girls themselves make of female hip-hop artists, popular television programs, and images of West Indians in the news media reveals unexpected demands for independent femininity and complex portrayals of Black characters, positioning these young women as critical social players looking to form bold political alliances. Although they have been essentially ignored in the literature on adolescent identity formation, West Indian teenage girls and their African American peers perform complex and contradictory negotiations as they make sense of themselves within American society and offer potent examples of female agency.