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# INTRODUCTION

**N**ostrand Avenue cuts through the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, one of the five boroughs of New York City. Long the hub of the city's West Indian community, Flatbush today is becoming increasingly Haitian. From its studios on Nostrand Avenue, Radio Soleil broadcasts in Haitian Creole to listeners eager for news from Haiti. A few doors down the street is the office of *Everybody's*, "the Caribbean-American magazine." Many of the small businesses along Nostrand are Caribbean-owned and cater to the immigrant community. Pelican Shipping and Trading will ship household effects to destinations in the Caribbean and worldwide. Alken Tours offers chartered flights to Trinidad at Carnival time. Haitian Transfer Express helps immigrants send money to their families back home. Caribbean Taste, Isle of Spice, and dozens of other eateries cook up dishes such as curry goat and callaloo greens. Allan's Bakery offers Jamaican meat patties and coconut buns. You can even get your hair cut in a Haitian ambiance at the Charlemagne Péralte barber shop.

Across the river in northern Manhattan, travel agencies boast cheap fares to Santo Domingo. Restaurants serve *sancocho*, a savory meat and vegetable stew. The Dominican Republic is the leading source of legal immigrants entering New York City, and the Washington Heights/Inwood neighborhood is the heart of the city's burgeoning Dominican community.

Along Park Street in the Frog Hollow section of Hartford, Connecticut, businesses draw customers with names that recall hometowns in Puerto Rico. Caguitas Market. Aibonitos Restaurant. Corozal Grocery. You can buy a muffler at Borinquen Auto Parts, and religious articles at Botánica Changó. Yet for most Park Street shoppers, however nostalgic, Hartford has become home. A popular restaurant on the street says as much in its name: "Aquí Me Quedo" (I'm Here to Stay).

New York City and Hartford are centers of Caribbean life in the United States. But they are not the only ones. In Miami, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and other cities, and in small towns from New Jersey to California, immigration from the Caribbean is reshaping the ethnic and cultural landscape.

This collection presents the voices of women and men of Caribbean background living in the United States. Some came to this country from the Caribbean as adults. Others arrived as children or teenagers with their families, and grew up here. Still others were born in the United States to parents who had immigrated from the Caribbean. There are important differences between the various Caribbean immigrant groups, and each person's history is unique. Yet their narratives and writings reveal many common experiences and feelings about the migration experience.

## The Readings

The readings fall into three broad categories: (1) oral narratives and memoirs; (2) fiction and poetry; (3) nonfiction articles and interviews.

In **oral narratives**, a person speaks to an interviewer who records the session. The audio tape is then transcribed, translated if necessary, and edited into a shorter written statement. The “life stories” in Part Two are oral narratives by

Caribbean immigrants or their descendants, most of whom were interviewed especially for this project. In **memoirs** a person writes about his or her life, usually in book form. An example is the excerpt in Part Three from Nicholasa Mohr's *Growing Up Inside the Sanctuary of My Imagination*.

**Fiction and poetry** in this book are mostly autobiographical, based on or inspired by events in the author's life. An example is the short story by Paule Marshall, “To Da-duh, in Memoriam.”

**Nonfiction articles and interviews** in this collection are by writers who have personal knowledge of their topics. In Part Four, for example, Victor Morisete-Romero, director of a Dominican community agency, discusses Dominican life in Washington Heights.

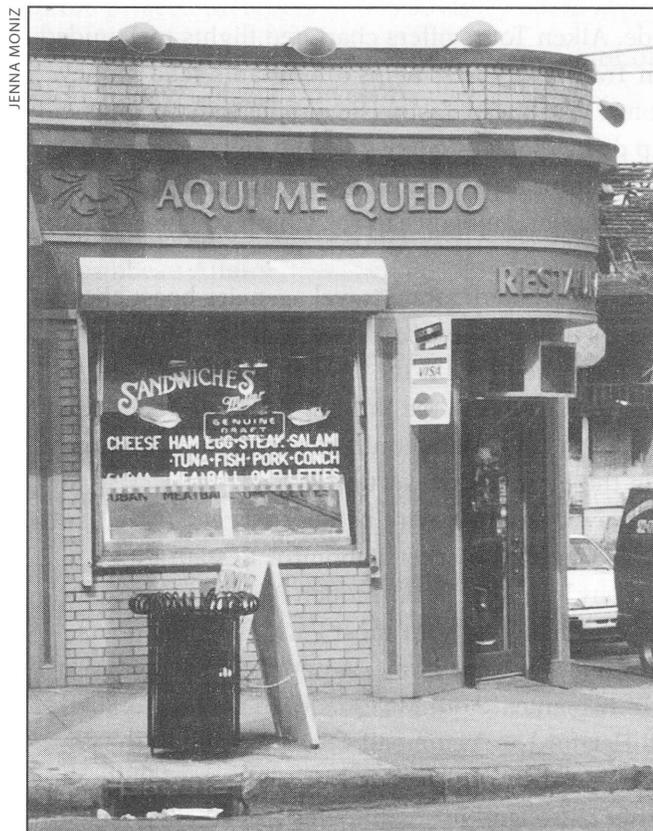
## The Writers

Speakers and writers in this book represent the largest Caribbean-origin groups in the United States. They trace their roots to one or more of the following areas: Puerto Rico; the English-speaking countries (sometimes called the West Indies); the Dominican Republic; Haiti; and Cuba.

By choosing to focus on these five groups, we have excluded those that are present in much smaller numbers, such as Surinamers. There are only a few Caribbean territories that have *not* sent a significant share of their population to North America. These territories are current or former colonies of France or the Netherlands, and their emigrants go mainly to Europe.

Puerto Ricans occupy a special position. As U.S. citizens, they are not immigrants. The quasi-colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico makes the Puerto Rican migration unlike any other. Nonetheless, Puerto Ricans who have moved to the United States share some experiences in common with others who have come from the Caribbean. They are the largest Caribbean-origin group in the 50 states and form one of the earliest and strongest connections between the United States and the Caribbean. As such, they feature prominently in this book.

Some of the selections in *Moving North* are excerpted from the published works of well-known authors. Others are essays written for this volume, or interviews with people from various walks of



*Aquí Me Quedo restaurant on Park Street in Hartford, Connecticut.*



*Metro Steel, a local steelband, warms up to play in the Labor Day Carnival in Brooklyn, New York.*

life. In all cases, deciding what to include was difficult. There is a rich and growing literature of fiction, poetry and memoirs by U.S. writers of Caribbean heritage; to keep the book a manageable size, we were forced to choose only a few examples and omit a number of prominent authors. Part Five suggests further reading for those who wish to explore this literature in greater depth.

### **Focus on Connecticut and New York**

Although the readings are drawn from various communities, New York City and Connecticut are areas of emphasis. Both have had immigration from the Caribbean since the nineteenth century. Both currently have large populations of Caribbean origin, especially Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and West Indians. And the Caribbean population in both Connecticut and New York is growing steadily as newcomers continue to arrive.

Caribbean cultural influence on the New York urban scene is unmistakable. Who could

imagine the city without salsa, without merengue, without the West Indian Carnival procession through Brooklyn each Labor Day? Less well known is the marked Caribbean presence in many Connecticut cities and towns. Puerto Ricans make up at least 33 percent of Hartford's population, the highest concentration of any large city in the United States, and are a rapidly growing presence in smaller cities such as Waterbury. West Indians in the Hartford area may number as many as 40,000, and 12 West Indian social clubs enliven the city's cultural scene.

For all these reasons, New York City and Connecticut make good case studies of Caribbean immigration when one book cannot do it all. Other cities and states could equally well have been chosen, and it is our hope that this glimpse of Caribbean life in the United States will encourage readers to discover and appreciate the Caribbean presence in other communities, beginning with their own.

## Organization of the Book

Part One, by the editors, begins with an overview of Caribbean history and a look at the migration experience of each of the five featured groups. A summary of U.S. immigration law is presented, along with a brief discussion of our nation's changing attitudes toward immigrants.

Part Two consists of personal narratives by 15 women and men of Caribbean heritage living in the United States. Their stories, told in their own words, bring to life the economic and political forces behind immigration. Their occupations—trade unionist, lawyer, factory worker, doctor, student, farmworker and musician, among others—suggest the wide range of talents Caribbean immigrants have brought and the kinds of contributions they have made.

Part Three contains selected fiction, poetry, and personal essays by writers of Caribbean heritage in the United States. All the readings deal in some way with the migration experience and life in this country; works set principally in the Caribbean are

not included, even if their authors have emigrated. Themes include homesickness, divided families, culture conflict, school experiences, language issues, generational issues, stereotyping, and construction of ethnic, national, racial and gender identities.

The title of Part Four, "Caribbean Crossroads," has a dual meaning. U.S. communities where many Caribbean immigrants have settled are a crossroads where American and Caribbean cultures meet. At the same time, these diaspora communities have become a crossroads for the meeting of people from different parts of the Caribbean, bringing their cultures into contact with each other. Articles and interviews provide a glimpse of Caribbean life in four cities: Miami, Washington, DC, Philadelphia and New York. The section concludes with a case study of one state, Connecticut, where Caribbean immigration has had a broad impact on community life.

Part Five outlines resources that groups can use to explore the Caribbean presence in their own communities, and gives suggestions for further reading. \*



MARILYN COOPER, COURTESY OF ROCKLAND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY