

Moving Beyond the West Indian Success Story: A Review Essay on New Scholarship on West Indians

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West Indian Immigrants: A Black Success Story? By Suzanne Model. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008. xii, 235 pp.

The West Indian Diaspora: Experiences in the United States and Canada. By Alwyn Gilkes. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2007. vii, 182 pp.

Investigating ethnic diversity within the Black community is a relatively new phenomenon. Although many scholars have addressed this issue, African Diaspora Studies and the growing visibility of Black ethnic groups in the United States have dramatically increased the amount of scholarship conducted in this area. Many scholars who address ethnic diversity focus primarily on the debate in reference to the West Indian success story. This narrow focus limits the diversity of scholarship that could be done on the complexity of the West Indian experience. This review will analyze two innovative books that have changed the typical interpretation of the West Indian success story.

Suzanne Model's book, *West Indian Immigrants: A Black Success Story?* diverges from the typical interpretation of the West Indian success story by empirically challenging the popular notions of West Indian success. Model was interested in discovering how and why West Indians had a higher socio-economic status than African Americans. Model uses three theories to explain this economic disparity: the cultural hypothesis argument asserts that West Indians' culture provides them with an advantage over African Americans; the positive selectivity argument maintains that West Indians who emigrate to the United States are naturally more driven than those who choose to remain in their home country; and the White favoritism argument claims that White Americans favor West Indians over African Americans (2-3). Through analysis of these three approaches, Model concludes that West Indians migrants are more favorably selected than their native counterparts and African Americans. However, Model also discovers that African-American internal migrants, compared to West Indians, had similar socio-economic outcomes. This data indicates that migration is a key factor in West Indian success, not cultural superiority or White favoritism (86-87). Model's provocative book attempts to move beyond mere acceptance of the West Indian success story. She investigates the premises and causes for this phenomenon. Despite innovative empirical analysis, Model's book is completely devoid of the perceptions and everyday interactions that shape West Indian lives. The next book takes on this task by employing qualitative data to examine the psychological effects of migration for West Indians.

Alwyn Gilkes examines the psychological stress of immigration on West Indians and Guyana immigrants in the United States and Canada. In his book, *The West Indian Diaspora: Experiences in the United States and Canada*, Gilkes examines the process of resilience and its role in helping West Indians cope with acculturation and the stress of moving (2-3). His goal for the study is to examine the relationship between acculturation, acculturative stress, and resilience. More specifically, he investigates how acculturative success is influenced by acculturation strategies, acculturation and protective factors, and cultural differences; how ethnic

identity, gender, social capital, racism, discrimination, and motivation shape immigrants' resilience; and finally how they adapt to acculturation and acculturation stress. Gilkes's primary method of analysis consists of in-depth interviews with voluntary immigrants in Toronto and New York (5).

Gilkes begins by briefly contextualizing the racial and political climates in New York and Toronto. He describes Canada as a society that is purportedly multicultural with a tolerance for racial and ethnic diversity. On the other hand, the United States, known for its racial and ethnic discrimination, expects immigrants to assimilate (15). In addition to their differing positions on integration, these two countries consequently have very different immigration policies. For example, Canada's point system favors skilled immigrants, resulting in a skilled West Indian population. In contrast, the United States' policy is focused more on kin relationships (16-22).

Following his contextualization of Canada and the United States, Gilkes proceeds to explain acculturation and outlines the factors that cause acculturative stress. Gilkes defines acculturation as a change that occurs through continuous contact among different groups of people (24). Acculturation stress occurs when an individual has a behavioral or value conflict between his or her original culture and the culture of the host society (27). Some of the risk factors that contribute to high acculturation stress include racism and discrimination, work-related concerns, familial stressors, environmental concerns, and gender. On the other hand, Gilkes also outlines several protective factors that enable West Indians to cope with their host society. One of the strongest links to good mental health for immigrant groups is the maintenance of ethnic identities (35). Furthermore, he discovers that transnational ties to a host country are important protective factors. Despite these protective factors and stresses, he argues that there are some immigrants who are resilient and able to cope successfully with the stress of moving to another country. Gilkes believes, however, that research on resilience is too fragmented: his solution to this problem is to challenge scholars to formalize a definition of the resilience process in studies on immigrant acculturation and to perform a general evaluation of it as it applies to Caribbean adults (40). The following analysis appears to be a response to these issues.

In the body of his analysis, Gilkes focuses on qualitative data from his West Indian respondents. The sample size consisted of eleven participants from Toronto and ten respondents from New York City. Some of the stressors his respondents identified were fear of failure, stress of adjusting to everyday activities, family stress, parent/child relationships, financial obligations, environment, and gender. Although these factors caused a surmountable amount of stress in some individuals' lives, most respondents did not rely on professional help to cope with them (123). In fact, protective factors such as personality, education, ethnic identity, religion, and most importantly social support through family and friends were crucial for West Indians immigrants' adjustment to a new society.

Overall, the emergent scholarship on West Indians is an exciting field. Nonetheless, the limited focus on the West Indian success story has dominated the discourse on West Indians. This essay reviewed two model works of scholarships that look outside the West Indian success story. These books not only highlight the diversity of experiences with the West Indian community, but they also complicate and challenge notions of the West Indian success story.