

The Importance of Hubs and Context for West Indian Immigrants: A Review Essay on New Scholarship on West Indians

By Caralee Jones

Jamaican Immigrants in the United States and Canada: Race, Transnationalism, and Social Capital. By Terry-Ann Jones. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2008. v, 190 pp.

Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World. By Vilna Bashi. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. ix, 319 pp.

The 1950s and '60s were pivotal years for African and Caribbean immigrants; more inclusive immigration policies made migration to the United States and Canada more accessible for immigrants who were not White or European. The prevalence of these new Black immigrants, especially West Indians, ignited numerous studies on ethnic diversity within the Black community in the United States. Scholars within this body of literature have either focused on West Indians as the Black success story (Sowell, 1978), or they have attempted to re-contextualize this success story through the lens of racialized hierarchies in the United States (Bashi and McDaniel, 1997; Pierre, 2004). Adding to this debate, Terry-Ann Jones and Vilna Bashi highlight through their provocative works the importance of context and social networks for the success of West Indian immigrants and their incorporation into the United States.

Terry-Ann Jones's book, *Jamaican Immigrants in the United States and Canada*, explores why individuals from Jamaica migrating to two very similar industrial countries, Canada and the United States, would have such different experiences. Moreover, she also discusses the extent to which geographic location and socioeconomic status affect transnationalism for Jamaican migrants. She concludes that these divergent experiences are a reflection of the different structural and racial contexts of the United States and Canada (13). Jones selects Toronto and South Florida as her two research sites. She chooses these two urban areas because they both have a relatively large Jamaican population, but very few studies have actually examined the experiences of Jamaicans in these areas. In her comparison of Jamaicans in Toronto and South Florida, Jones explores three core themes. Her first theme examines the impact that structural factors have on the mobility of Jamaican immigrants; within her structural factors she specifically explores immigration policies, labor markets, and immigrant organizations. Her next theme focuses on whether the racial compositions in the United States and Canada affect the incorporation and socioeconomic mobility of Jamaican migrants. Her last theme explores how geographic context shapes transnationalism for Jamaican migrants (43-44).

Jones addresses her three core themes by employing an array of qualitative and quantitative methods. Her quantitative methods are comprised of census data from the United States and Canada along with statistics from the United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Her qualitative methods are drawn from interviews with 52 Jamaicans in Toronto and 48 Jamaicans in South Florida. The results of this study indicate a slight socioeconomic difference between Jamaican immigrants in Canada and the United States. Jamaicans in South Florida have higher levels of education and incomes as well as higher levels of home and business ownership than Jamaicans in Toronto (158). Jones reveals that what affects socioeconomic mobility among Jamaican immigrants in the United States and Canada is the different racial and ethnic compositions in these two areas. The absence of a native Black

population in Canada impedes the incorporation and socioeconomic mobility of Jamaicans in that country. Unlike the United States, Canada lacks institutional policies like Affirmative Action or other programs to help Jamaicans mobilize against racism and advance socially and economically. The native-born Black population in the U. S. has established institutions and networks, which make it easier for other Black immigrants to incorporate into society and take advantage of race-based policies. In sum, Jones's study is a great introduction to the ways in which context shapes immigrants' experiences and the usefulness of doing comparative studies on immigrant populations. Her findings also challenge the debate surrounding the West Indian success story by demonstrating the ways in which that success story is shaped by the geographic context and the ethnic and racial composition of where West Indians migrate.

In addition to being in a context where a native minority group can insulate West Indians from racism and discrimination as well as help elevate their socioeconomic status, Vilna Bashi, in her book *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World*, discovers that social networks are essential to migration and the subsequent success of West Indian immigrants. Bashi contends that network ties are the catalysts for how and why migration occurs, thereby transcending economic-based explanations of pull and push factors for migration as well as notions that West Indians are positively selected. In order to understand better the salience of social networks for West Indian immigrants, Bashi uses ethnographic data and in-depth interviews with 90 West Indian immigrants from New York, London, and the West Indies. She initiates her study by interviewing two separate West Indian individuals in New York City. From these initial contacts, she uses snowball methods to learn about and interview individuals within her first contact's networks. By following these connections from the snowball method, Bashi was able to construct a structure of network connection (25-26). From studying these networks, Bashi discovers that West Indians employ social networks not only to enter the United States, but also to find housing, jobs, and eventually to achieve socioeconomic stability. She further develops her argument through the concept of a hub, an individual who helps bring in new immigrants, and a spoke, who is brought in by a hub and subsequently benefits from his or her resources (24-25). It is through these networked relationships that Bashi is able to explain the structure, function, and maintenance of West Indian immigrants' social networks, which is something very few other scholars have been able to accomplish.

Bashi's work is one of the few books (if not the only) that uses social network analysis to explain why and how networks help West Indian immigrants migrate to the United States and eventually achieve socioeconomic success. Bashi explains the structure of West Indian networks as being formed around a hub, who has access to various social and economic resources, is invested in helping other immigrants, and is willing to sacrifice in order to see other countrymen migrate and succeed in America. The individuals who benefit from these seemingly altruistic actions are the spokes. Although the spokes do not take an active role in recruiting other immigrants, they do partake in a culture of reciprocity that helps maintain the community. Thus, from Bashi's perspective, it is not simply having a connection to an individual in another country that helps facilitate immigration, but instead it is having a specific tie to an individual, a hub, that is essential to the migration process. Furthermore, it is this hub that helps incoming immigrants find jobs, housing, and eventually obtain citizenship papers. Unlike Cuban ethnic enclaves in Miami (Portes, 1987), West Indian immigrants use their social networks to create a niche, primarily within the labor market, instead of through self-employment or entrepreneurship, like Cuban immigrants (179). Not only do these networks provide some socioeconomic mobility, but they also help insulate West Indian immigrants from the breadth of racism and discrimination.

Similar to Jones's study, Bashi argues that being in a country where there is a native minority group enables West Indians to use their networks to distinguish themselves from the native minority group at the bottom. This is not the case in Britain, where West Indian immigrants do not enjoy this benefit (224). Furthermore, networks also enable West Indians to ignore the breadth of racism and discrimination by being socially isolated and having the illusion of social mobility, a luxury that is not available to the children of West Indian immigrants or African Americans (241). Overall, through this structure of networks, Bashi is able to explain the power of social networks and how the notion of the West Indian success story is an ethnic myth that can be explained by their social networks and not their superior culture.

In sum, Jones's and Bashi's works demonstrate the importance of context and social networks for the West Indian success story. They also demonstrate that African Americans play a crucial role in the success story of West Indians, because they provide a minority group from which West Indians can differentiate themselves and essential resources and institutions for West Indian immigrant adjustment and incorporation into U. S. racial hierarchy.