

from The New Yorker

April 29, 1996
PERSONAL HISTORY

Black Like Them

Through the lens of his own family's experience, the author explores why West Indians and American blacks are perceived differently.

by Malcolm Gladwell

1.

My cousin Rosie and her husband, Noel, live in a two-bedroom bungalow on Argyle Avenue, in Uniondale, on the west end of Long Island. When they came to America, twelve years ago, they lived in a basement apartment a dozen or so blocks away, next to their church. At the time, they were both taking classes at the New York Institute of Technology, which was right nearby. But after they graduated, and Rosie got a job managing a fast-food place and Noel got a job in asbestos removal, they managed to save a little money and bought the house on Argyle Avenue.

From the outside, their home looks fairly plain. It's in a part of Uniondale that has a lot of tract housing from just after the war, and most of the houses are alike--squat and square, with aluminum siding, maybe a

dormer window in the attic, and a small patch of lawn out front. But there is a beautiful park down the street, the public schools are supposed to be good, and Rosie and Noel have built a new garage and renovated the basement. Now that Noel has started his own business, as an environmental engineer, he has his office down there--Suite 2B, it says on his stationery--and every morning he puts on his tie and goes down the stairs to make calls and work on the computer. If Noel's business takes off, Rosie says, she would like to move to a bigger house, in Garden City, which is one town over. She says this even though Garden City is mostly white. In fact, when she told one of her girlfriends, a black American, about this idea, her friend said that she was crazy--that Garden City was no place for a black person. But that is just the point. Rosie and Noel are from Jamaica. They don't consider themselves black at all.

This doesn't mean that my cousins haven't sometimes been lumped together with American blacks. Noel had a job once removing asbestos at Kennedy Airport, and his boss there called him "nigger" and cut his hours. But Noel didn't take it personally. That boss, he says, didn't like women or Jews, either, or people with college degrees--or even himself, for that matter. Another time, Noel found out that a white guy working next to him in the same job and with the same qualifications was making ten thousand dollars a year more than he was. He quit the next day. Noel knows that racism is out there. It's just that he doesn't quite understand--or accept--the categories on which it depends.

To a West Indian, black is a literal description: you are black if your skin is black. Noel's father, for example, is black. But his mother had a

white father, and she herself was fair-skinned and could pass. As for Rosie, her mother and my mother, who are twins, thought of themselves while they were growing up as "middle-class brown," which is to say that they are about the same shade as Colin Powell. That's because our maternal grandfather was part Jewish, in addition to all kinds of other things, and Grandma, though she was a good deal darker than he was, had enough Scottish blood in her to have been born with straight hair. Rosie's mother married another brown Jamaican, and that makes Rosie a light chocolate. As for my mother, she married an Englishman, making everything that much more complicated, since by the racial categories of my own heritage I am one thing and by the racial categories of America I am another. Once, when Rosie and Noel came to visit me while I was living in Washington, D.C., Noel asked me to show him "where the black people lived," and I was confused for a moment until I realized that he was using "black" in the American sense, and so was asking in the same way that someone visiting Manhattan might ask where Chinatown was. That the people he wanted to see were in many cases racially indistinguishable from him

didn't matter. The facts of his genealogy, of his nationality, of his status as an immigrant made him, in his own eyes, different.

This question of who West Indians are and how they define themselves may seem trivial, like racial hairsplitting. But it is not trivial. In the past twenty years, the number of West Indians in America has exploded. There are now half a million in the New York area alone and, despite their recent arrival, they make substantially more money than American blacks. They live in better neighborhoods. Their families are stronger. In the New York area, in fact, West Indians fare about as well as Chinese and Korean immigrants. That is why the Caribbean invasion and the issue of West Indian identity have become such controversial issues. What does it say about the nature of racism that another group of blacks, who have the same legacy of slavery as their American counterparts and are physically indistinguishable from them, can come here and succeed as well as the Chinese and the Koreans do? Is overcoming racism as simple as doing what Noel does, which is to dismiss it, to hold himself above it, to brave it and move on?

These are difficult questions, not merely for what they

imply about American blacks but for the ways in which they appear to contradict conventional views of what prejudice is. Racism, after all, is supposed to be indiscriminate. For example, sociologists have observed that the more blacks there are in a community the more negative the whites' attitudes will be. Blacks in Denver have a far easier time than blacks in, say, Cleveland. Lynchings in the South at the turn of this century, to give another example, were far more common in counties where there was a large black population than in areas where whites were in the majority. Prejudice is the crudest of weapons, a reaction against blacks in the aggregate that grows as the perception of black threat grows. If that is the case, however, the addition of hundreds of thousands of new black immigrants to the New York area should have made things worse for people like Rosie and Noel, not better. And, if racism is so indiscriminate in its application, why is one group of blacks flourishing and the other not?

The implication of West Indian success is that racism does not really exist at all--at least, not in the form that we have assumed it does. The implication is that the

key factor in understanding racial prejudice is not the behavior and attitudes of whites but the behavior and attitudes of blacks--not white discrimination but black culture. It implies that when the conservatives in Congress say the responsibility for ending urban poverty lies not with collective action but with the poor themselves they are right.

I think of this sometimes when I go with Rosie and Noel to their church, which is in Hempstead, just a mile away. It was once a white church, but in the past decade or so it has been taken over by immigrants from the Caribbean. They have so swelled its membership that the church has bought much of the surrounding property and is about to add a hundred seats to its sanctuary. The pastor, though, is white, and when the band up front is playing and the congregation is in full West Indian form the pastor sometimes seems out of place, as if he cannot move in time with the music. I always wonder how long the white minister at Rosie and Noel's church will last--whether there won't be some kind of groundswell among the congregation to replace him with one of their own. But Noel tells me the issue has never really come up.

Noel says, in fact, that he's happier with a white minister, for the same reasons that he's happy with his neighborhood, where the people across the way are Polish and another neighbor is Hispanic and still another is a black American. He doesn't want to be shut off from everyone else, isolated within the narrow confines of his race. He wants to be part of the world, and when he says these things it is awfully tempting to credit that attitude with what he and Rosie have accomplished.

Is this confidence, this optimism, this equanimity all that separates the poorest of American blacks from a house on Argyle Avenue?

2.

In 1994, Philip Kasinitz, a sociologist at Manhattan's Hunter College, and Jan Rosenberg, who teaches at Long Island University, conducted a study of the Red Hook area of Brooklyn, a neighborhood of around thirteen or fourteen thousand which lies between the waterfront and the Gowanus Expressway. Red Hook has a large public-housing project at its center, and around the project, in the streets that line the waterfront, are several hundred thriving blue-collar businesses--warehouses, shipping companies, small manufacturers, and contractors. The object of the

study was to resolve what Kasinitz and Rosenberg saw as the paradox of Red Hook: despite Red Hook's seemingly fortuitous conjunction of unskilled labor and blue-collar jobs, very few of the Puerto Ricans and African-Americans from the neighborhood ever found work in the bustling economy of their own back yard.

After dozens of interviews with local employers, the two researchers uncovered a persistent pattern of what they call positive discrimination. It was not that the employers did not like blacks and Hispanics. It was that they had developed an elaborate mechanism for distinguishing between those they felt were "good" blacks and those they felt were "bad" blacks, between those they judged to be "good" Hispanics and those they considered "bad" Hispanics. "Good" meant that you came from outside the neighborhood, because employers identified locals with the crime and dissipation they saw on the streets around them. "Good" also meant that you were an immigrant, because employers felt that being an immigrant implied a loyalty and a willingness to work and learn not found among the native-born. In Red Hook, the good Hispanics

are Mexican and South American, not Puerto Rican. And the good blacks are West Indian.

The Harvard sociologist Mary C. Waters conducted a similar study, in 1993, which looked at a food-service company in Manhattan where West Indian workers have steadily displaced African-Americans in the past few years. The transcripts of her interviews with the company managers make fascinating reading, providing an intimate view of the perceptions that govern the urban workplace. Listen to one forty-year-old white male manager on the subject of West Indians:

They tend more to shy away from doing all of the illegal things because they have such strict rules down in their countries and jails. And they're nothing like here. So like, they're like really paranoid to do something wrong. They seem to be very, very self-conscious of it. No matter what they have to do, if they have to try and work three jobs, they do. They won't go into drugs or anything like that.

Or listen to this, from a fifty-three-year-old white female manager:

I work closely with this one girl who's from Trinidad.

And she told me when she first came here to live with her sister and cousin, she had two children. And she said I'm here four years and we've reached our goals. And what was your goal? For her two children to each have their own bedroom. Now she has a three bedroom apartment and she said that's one of the goals she was shooting for. . . . If that was an American, they would say, I reached my goal. I bought a Cadillac.

This idea of the West Indian as a kind of superior black is not a new one. When the first wave of Caribbean immigrants came to New York and Boston, in the early nineteenth-hundreds, other blacks dubbed them Jewmaicans, in derisive reference to the emphasis they placed on hard work and education. In the nineteen-eighties, the economist Thomas Sowell gave the idea a serious intellectual imprimatur by arguing that the West Indian advantage was a historical legacy of Caribbean slave culture. According to Sowell, in the American South slaveowners tended to hire managers who were married, in order to limit the problems created by sexual relations between overseers and slave women. But the West Indies were a hardship post, without a large and settled white population. There the overseers tended to be bachelors, and, with white

women scarce, there was far more commingling of the races. The resulting large group of coloreds soon formed a kind of proto-middle class, performing various kinds of skilled and sophisticated tasks that there were not enough whites around to do, as there were in the American South. They were carpenters, masons, plumbers, and small businessmen, many years in advance of their American counterparts, developing skills that required education and initiative.

My mother and Rosie's mother came from this colored class. Their parents were schoolteachers in a tiny village buried in the hills of central Jamaica. My grandmother's and grandfather's salaries combined put them, at best, on the lower rungs of the middle class. But their expectations went well beyond that. In my grandfather's library were Dickens and Maupassant. My mother and her sister were pushed to win scholarships to a proper English-style boarding school at the other end of the island; and later, when my mother graduated, it was taken for granted that she would attend university in England, even though the cost of tuition and passage meant that my grandmother

had to borrow a small fortune from the Chinese grocer down the road.

My grandparents had ambitions for their children, but it was a special kind of ambition, born of a certainty that American blacks did not have--that their values were the same as those of society as a whole, and that hard work and talent could actually be rewarded. In my mother's first year at boarding school, she looked up "Negro" in the eleventh edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica. "In certain . . . characteristics . . . the negro would appear to stand on a lower evolutionary plane than the white man," she read. And the entry continued:

The mental constitution of the negro is very similar to that of a child, normally good-natured and cheerful, but subject to sudden fits of emotion and passion during which he is capable of performing acts of singular atrocity, impressionable, vain, but often exhibiting in the capacity of servant a dog-like fidelity which has stood the supreme test.

All black people of my mother's generation--and of generations before and since--have necessarily faced a moment like this, when they are confronted for the first time with the

allegation of their inferiority. But, at least in my mother's case, her school was integrated, and that meant she knew black girls who were more intelligent than white girls, and she knew how she measured against the world around her. At least she lived in a country that had blacks and browns in every position of authority, so her personal experience gave the lie to what she read in the encyclopedia. This, I think, is what Noel means when he says that he cannot quite appreciate what it is that weighs black Americans down, because he encountered the debilitating effects of racism late, when he was much stronger. He came of age in a country where he belonged to the majority.

When I was growing up, my mother sometimes read to my brothers and me from the work of Louise Bennett, the great Jamaican poet of my mother's generation. The poem I remember best is about two women--one black and one white--in a hair salon, the black woman getting her hair straightened and, next to her, the white woman getting her hair curled:

same time me mind start 'tink 'bout me and de white woman how me tek out me natural perm and she put in false one

There is no anger or resentment here, only irony

and playfulness--the two races captured in a shared moment of absurdity. Then comes the twist. The black woman is paying less to look white than the white woman is to look black:

de two a we da tek a risk what rain or shine will bring but fe har risk is t're poun' fi me onle five shillin'

In the nineteen-twenties, the garment trade in New York was first integrated by West Indian women, because, the legend goes, they would see the sign on the door saying "No blacks need apply" and simply walk on in. When I look back on Bennett's poem, I think I understand how they found the courage to do that.

3.

It is tempting to use the West Indian story as evidence that discrimination doesn't really exist--as proof that the only thing inner-city African-Americans have to do to be welcomed as warmly as West Indians in places like Red Hook is to make the necessary cultural adjustments. If West Indians are different, as they clearly are, then it is easy to imagine that those differences are the reason for their success--that their refusal to be bowed is what lets them walk on by the signs that prohibit them or

move to neighborhoods that black Americans would shy away from. It also seems hard to see how the West Indian story is in any way consistent with the idea of racism as an indiscriminate, pernicious threat aimed at all black people.

But here is where things become more difficult, and where what seems obvious about West Indian achievement turns out not to be obvious at all. One of the striking things in the Red Hook study, for example, is the emphasis that the employers appeared to place on hiring outsiders--Irish or Russian or Mexican or West Indian immigrants from places far from Red Hook. The reason for this was not, the researchers argue, that the employers had any great familiarity with the cultures of those immigrants. They had none, and that was the point. They were drawn to the unfamiliar because what was familiar to them--the projects of Red Hook--was anathema. The Columbia University anthropologist Katherine Newman makes the same observation in a recent study of two fast-food restaurants in Harlem. She compared the hundreds of people who applied for jobs at those restaurants with the few people who were actually hired, and found, among other things, that how far an applicant lived

from the job site made a huge difference. Of those applicants who lived less than two miles from the restaurant, ten per cent were hired. Of those who lived more than two miles from the restaurant, nearly forty per cent were hired. As Newman puts it, employers preferred the ghetto they didn't know to the ghetto they did.

Neither study describes a workplace where individual attitudes make a big difference, or where the clunky and impersonal prejudices that characterize traditional racism have been discarded. They sound like places where old-style racism and appreciation of immigrant values are somehow bound up together. Listen to another white manager who was interviewed by Mary Waters:

Island blacks who come over, they're immigrant. They may not have such a good life where they are so they gonna try to strive to better themselves and I think there's a lot of American blacks out there who feel we owe them. And enough is enough already. You know, this is something that happened to their ancestors, not now. I mean, we've done so much for the black people in America now that it's time that they got off their butts.

Here, then, are the two competing ideas about racism side by side: the manager issues a blanket condemnation of American blacks even as he holds West Indians up as a cultural ideal. The example of West Indians as "good" blacks makes the old blanket prejudice against American blacks all the easier to express. The manager can tell black Americans to get off their butts without fear of sounding, in his own ears, like a racist, because he has simultaneously celebrated island blacks for their work ethic. The success of West Indians is not proof that discrimination against American blacks does not exist. Rather, it is the means by which discrimination against American blacks is given one last, vicious twist: I am not so shallow as to despise you for the color of your skin, because I have found people your color that I like. Now I can despise you for who you are.

This is racism's newest mutation--multicultural racism, where one ethnic group can be played off against another. But it is wrong to call West Indians the victors in this competition, in anything but the narrowest sense. In American history, immigrants have always profited from assimilation: as they have adopted the

language and customs of this country, they have sped their passage into the mainstream. The new racism means that West Indians are the first group of people for whom that has not been true. Their advantage depends on their remaining outsiders, on remaining unfamiliar, on being distinct by custom, culture, and language from the American blacks they would otherwise resemble. There is already some evidence that the considerable economic and social advantages that West Indians hold over American blacks begin to dissipate by the second generation, when the island accent has faded, and those in positions of power who draw distinctions between good blacks and bad blacks begin to lump West Indians with everyone else. For West Indians, assimilation is tantamount to suicide. This is a cruel fate for any immigrant group, but it is especially so for West Indians, whose history and literature are already redolent with the themes of dispossession and loss, with the long search for identity and belonging. In the nineteen-twenties, Marcus Garvey sought community in the idea of Africa. Bob Marley, the Jamaican reggae singer, yearned for Zion. In "Rites of Passage" the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite writes:

Where, then, is the nigger's home?

In Paris Brixton Kingston Rome?

Here?

Or in Heaven?

America might have been home. But it is not: not Red Hook, anyway; not Harlem; not even Argyle Avenue.

There is also no small measure of guilt here, for West Indians cannot escape the fact that their success has come, to some extent, at the expense of American blacks, and that as they have noisily differentiated themselves from African-Americans--promoting the stereotype of themselves as the good blacks--they have made it easier for whites to join in. It does not help matters that the same kinds of distinctions between good and bad blacks which govern the immigrant experience here have always lurked just below the surface of life in the West Indies as well. It was the infusion of white blood that gave the colored class its status in the Caribbean, and the members of this class have never forgotten that, nor have they failed, in a thousand subtle ways, to distance themselves from those around them who experienced a darker and less privileged past.

In my mother's house, in Harewood, the family often passed around a pencilled

drawing of two of my great-grandparents; she was part Jewish, and he was part Scottish. The other side--the African side--was never mentioned. My grandmother was the ringleader in this. She prized my grandfather's light skin, but she also suffered as a result of this standard. "She's nice, you know, but she's too dark," her mother-in-law would say of her. The most telling story of all, though, is the story of one of my mother's relatives, whom I'll call Aunt Joan, who was as fair as my great-grandmother was. Aunt Joan married what in Jamaica is called an Injun--a man with a dark complexion that is redeemed from pure Africanness by straight, fine black hair. She had two daughters by him--handsome girls with dark complexions. But he died young, and one day, while she was travelling on a train to visit her daughter, she met and took an interest in a light-skinned man in the same railway car. What happened next is something that Aunt Joan told only my mother, years later, with the greatest of shame. When she got off the train, she walked right by her daughter, disowning her own flesh and blood, because she did not want a man so light-skinned and desirable to know that she had borne a daughter so dark.

My mother, in the nineteen-sixties, wrote a book about her experiences. It was entitled "Brown Face, Big Master," the brown face referring to her and the big master, in the Jamaican dialect, referring to God. Sons, of course, are hardly objective on the achievements of their mothers, but there is one passage in the book that I find unforgettable, because it is such an eloquent testimony to the moral precariousness of the Jamaican colored class--to the mixture of confusion and guilt that attends its position as beneficiary of racism's distinctions. The passage describes a time just after my mother and father were married, when they were living in London and my eldest brother was still a baby. They were looking for an apartment, and after a long search my father found one in a London suburb. On the day after they moved in, however, the landlady ordered them out. "You didn't tell me your wife was colored," she told my father, in a rage.

In her book my mother describes her long struggle to make sense of this humiliation, to reconcile her experience with her faith. In the end, she was forced to acknowledge that anger was not an option--that as a Jamaican "middle-class

brown," and a descendant of Aunt Joan, she could hardly reproach another for the impulse to divide good black from bad black:

I complained to God in so many words: "Here I was, the wounded representative of the negro race in our struggle to be accounted free and equal with the dominating whites!" And God was amused; my prayer did not ring true with Him. I would try again. And then God said, "Have you not done the same thing? Remember this one and that one, people whom you have slighted or avoided or treated less considerately than others because they were different superficially, and you were ashamed to be identified with them. Have you not been glad that you are not more colored than you are? Grateful that you are not black?" My anger and hate against the landlady melted. I was no better than she was, nor worse for that matter. . . . We were both guilty of the sin of self-regard, the pride and the exclusiveness by which we cut some people off from ourselves.

4.

I grew up in Canada, in a little farming town an hour and a half outside of Toronto. My father teaches mathematics at a nearby university, and my mother is a therapist. For many years, she was the only

black person in town, but I cannot remember wondering or worrying, or even thinking, about this fact. Back then, color meant only good things. It meant my cousins in Jamaica. It meant the graduate students from Africa and India my father would bring home from the university. My own color was not something I ever thought much about, either, because it seemed such a stray fact. Blacks knew what I was. They could discern the hint of Africa beneath my fair skin. But it was a kind of secret--something that they would ask me about quietly when no one else was around. ("Where you from?" an older black man once asked me. "Ontario," I said, not thinking. "No," he replied. "Where you from?" And then I understood and told him, and he nodded as if he had already known. "We was speculatin' about your heritage," he said.) But whites never guessed, and even after I informed them it never seemed to make a difference. Why would it? In a town that is ninety-nine per cent white, one modest alleged splash of color hardly amounts to a threat.

But things changed when I left for Toronto to attend college. This was during the early nineteen-eighties, when West Indians were immigrating to Canada in

droves, and Toronto had become second only to New York as the Jamaican expatriates' capital in North America. At school, in the dining hall, I was served by Jamaicans. The infamous Jane-Finch projects, in northern Toronto, were considered the Jamaican projects. The drug trade then taking off was said to be the Jamaican drug trade. In the popular imagination, Jamaicans were--and are--welfare queens and gun-toting gangsters and dissolute youths. In Ontario, blacks accused of crimes are released by the police eighteen per cent of the time; whites are released twenty-nine per cent of the time. In drug-trafficking and importing cases, blacks are twenty-seven times as likely as whites to be jailed before their trial takes place, and twenty times as likely to be imprisoned on drug-possession charges.

After I had moved to the United States, I puzzled over this seeming contradiction--how West Indians celebrated in New York for their industry and drive could represent, just five hundred miles northwest, crime and dissipation. Didn't Torontonians see what was special and different in West Indian culture? But that was a naïve question. The West Indians were the first significant

brush with blackness that white, smug, comfortable Torontonians had ever had. They had no bad blacks to contrast with the newcomers, no African-Americans to serve as a safety valve for their prejudices, no way to perform America's crude racial triage.

Not long ago, I sat in a coffee shop with someone I knew vaguely from college, who, like me, had moved to New York from Toronto. He began to speak of the threat that he felt Toronto now faced. It was the Jamaicans, he said. They were a bad seed. He was, of course, oblivious of my background. I said nothing, though, and he launched into a long explanation of how, in slave times, Jamaica was the island where all the most troublesome and obstreperous slaves were sent, and how that accounted for their particularly nasty disposition today.

I have told that story many times since, usually as a joke, because it was funny in an appalling way--particularly when I informed him much, much later that my mother was Jamaican. I tell the story that way because otherwise it is too painful. There must be people in Toronto just like Rosie and Noel, with the same attitudes and aspirations, who want to live in a neighborhood as nice as Argyle Avenue, who want to build a new garage and renovate their basement

and set up their own business downstairs. But it is not completely up to them, is it? What has happened to Jamaicans in Toronto is proof that what has happened to Jamaicans here is not the end of racism, or even the beginning of the end of racism, but an accident of history and geography. In America, there is someone else to despise. In Canada, there is not. In the new racism, as in the old, somebody always has to be the nigger.

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