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Irma Watkins-Owens. *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. 256 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21048-7; $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33024-6.

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For urban African-Americans in the Northeast, Harlem has served as a metaphor of community. Irma Watkins-Owens' *Blood Relations* analyzes the emergence of Harlem's African-American community during the first three decades of the twentieth century by looking at the relationship between West Indian immigrants and U.S.-born southern immigrants. For Watkins-Owens, an Associate Professor and Director of the African American and Africana Studies Institute at Fordham University, the community created in early twentieth-century Harlem was not just built on race but also on ethnicity. The importance of West Indian immigration into Harlem in helping to build a community based on racial and ethnic terms is the main focus of *Blood Relations.* To substantiate her main thesis, Watkins-Owen's relies on material from federal and city censuses, civic, religious, cultural and political associations, community businesses [both legal and illegal], oral testimonies, and literature.

Blood Relations is foremost a study of how social, cultural,political and economic institutions were created in Harlem by both native and foreign-born blacks. Through these institutions–whether island-specific benevolent institutions, political clubs such as the United Colored Democracy, or 'race enterprises' such as the ones sponsored by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA]–the author traces the legacy of competition and solidarity that shaped relations between Harlem's black immigrants. For West Indian immigrants, these institutions served as mechanisms which facilitated their integration into a society with quite different cultural and historical notions of race relations.

Watkins-Owen's book challenges several longstanding myths regarding the relationship between West Indians blacks and African-Americans in Harlem. First, she highlights the contribution of West Indians to the development of the Harlem community during the earlier part of this century. After all, immigrants from the British Caribbean colonies comprised about twenty-five percent of Harlem's population. The second challenge is to nuance the historiographical emphasis on the competition and animosity between the native and the foreign-born blacks in Harlem. Although the author acknowledges that certain aspects of the relationship between these two groups was tense, particularly on the issue of partisan politics, her argument is that both sides were connected by a complex web of quotidian struggles and solidarities which were mediated and exacerbated by both racial and ethnic issues. Finally, the author breaks from the neglect of women's and gender issues in West Indian immigrant literature. Throughout the book, Watkins-Owens points to the important roles played by women in benevolent, charitable, and civic organizations, in fundraising, in community and political organizing, in literature, and even in the numbers (illegal lottery) game.

The book has several particularly innovative thematic chapters. In Chapter Six, "Stepladder to Community," Watkins-Owens traces the development of street corner speakers who began to make their presence known, and heard, in the late 1910s. These speakers were often at odds with Harlem's Republican and Democratic black leaders. "The street corner became," according to the author, "the most viable location for an alternative politics and the place where new social movements gained a hearing and recruited supporters" (p. 92). Even if the activities of street corner radicals are a bit romanticized in the book, Watkins-Owens makes an important contribution to tracing the political genealogy of Harlem's 1960s religious and civil rights leaders.

Another fascinating chapter is entitled "The Underground Entrepreneur," in which the author discusses the organization and the importance of the numbers game in Harlem's economy. The numbers operation sustained an underground economy, which provided employment and social mobility opportunities to many people within the community. Furthermore, 'bankers' (as the numbers

operators were known) played a fundamental role in financing many community projects, and as such, were respected by the community as race men and women. Watkins-Owens portrayal of the flamboyant so-called "Numbers Queen," Madame Stephanie St. Clair, is indicative of the kind of respect that black bankers received even after they had been exposed and harassed by city authorities. St. Claire's campaign to fight the penetration of white gangsters into Harlem numbers business and the rampant police corruption show how racial solidarity and communitarian credentials played a vital role in Harlem's life.

The demographic evolution of Harlem during the period 1900-1930 is explored in Chapter Three, "On to Harlem." Watkins-Owen shows how the area changed from one populated by second-generation Irish, Germans, and Jews into one with a black majority by the 1920s. Besides using general census statistics, the author microanalyses a residential block in Harlem's 131st street between Lenox and Fifth avenues. Her rationale for using this block–succinctly argued in a very useful appendix–is that this block was representative of the main demographic trends affecting Harlem and of the housing, occupational, and ethnic diversity within black Harlem. Although her rationale was convincing, it would have been illuminating to analyze and compare other 'less typical' residential areas in Harlem. Sometimes less typical sections or individuals provide crucial clues to determine more representative dimensions of daily life and social exchange.

A major problem in Watkins-Owens' book is her lack of a clear definition of ethnicity. Although the author never provides a straightforward definition of ethnicity in the book, her usage suggests that she equates ethnicity with nationality. Thus, the main ethnic difference between Afro-Caribbeans and African-Americans in Harlem was the fact that the former were born in the British Caribbean colonies. Although Watkins-Owens mentions the presence of East Indian, Chinese, Spanish, and Middle Eastern people in the West Indies–and among the West Indian immigrants to Harlem as well–the term ethnicity is never problematized, and the West Indian immigrants constitute a coherent whole without any significant internal divisions [the author does mention class differences among the foreign migrants]. The reader is left to wonder how the well-known differences and rivalries between people from the different Caribbean islands played out in Harlem? Was individual island-nationalism stronger than a pan-Caribbean sense of identity? Did both tendencies coexist? Did different countries of origin make any difference to adapting to white and to black America in Harlem? How did competing West Indians notions of ethnicity–quite different in Trinidad, for example, than in Barbados–changed upon facing U.S. notions of ethnicity? The strong participation in country-specific clubs and associations indicate that island-nationalism was important to the immigrants. If Watkins-Owens is trying to suggest that intra-island differences and rivalries dissipated as a result of facing a hostile environment upon arrival to the U.S., she should make her point explicitly.

Blood Relations is a solid contribution to the fields of African-American, Caribbean, and Urban Studies. The book complements on-going historical research on the relationship between early twentieth-century West Indians and native-born blacks, such as Violet Mary-Ann Johnson's study of Boston.[1] Watkins-Owens also challenges assertions about the public and political expressions of West Indian ethnicity in New York City as suggested by Philip Kasinitz's *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race.*[2] *Blood Relation's* clear prose, straightforward presentation of themes and issues, and astute combination of personal vignettes with collective descriptions make the book ideal for classroom use, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As our urban and intellectual centers grapple with issues of ethnic and racial diversity, Watkins-Owens has provided a timely study which should inject much needed historical depth not only to on-going public policy debates, but also to scholarly discussions regarding the construction of identities and communities.

Notes:

[1]. Johnson, Violet Mary-Ann. *The Migration Experience: Social and Economic Adjustment of British West Indian Immigrants in Boston, 1915-1950* . Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston College, 1993.

[2]. Kasinitz, Philip. *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Further References:

Sutton, Constance R. and Elsa M. Chaney, editors. *Caribbean Life in New York City: Sociocultural Dimensions.* Staten Island, NY: Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1987.

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