

Strategic Negotiations: West Indian Women, Diasporic Identity and Television

by

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For my Biological and Spiritual Family and Friends
who lent their shoulders,
my Prince who held my hand,
and my Promise Keeper who made it all possible

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Abstract

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study, relying on in-depth interviews and focus groups, of the influence of West Indian immigrant women's engagement with mainstream television on their ongoing diasporic identity formation in the U.S. I argue that first-generation immigrant women's interactions with competitive reality shows were expressive of their identity as hard-workers, and that their post-consumption dialogues, as well as their narrative-based engagement with the texts, were constitutive of their perceptions of and connections to their islands. I also contend that mainstream television facilitated and reflected the coping narratives that these women developed in the U.S. to deal with their diasporic experiences. Furthermore, I demonstrate how their engagement with mainstream television fostered their strategic selection of elements of their pre-migration body politics, and those of their diasporic space. In addition, I contend that the second-generation immigrant women's disidentification with soap operas reflected the bilateral cultural distancing that characterized their identity. Their engagement with mainstream television was thus indicative of their liminal identity that drew on both West Indian and American ideologies to evade the negativities of both. For both groups of women, then, engagement with mainstream television was indicative of their strategic negotiations of the cultural milieu of the U.S., and was a practice that ultimately

engendered their strategic hybridization. My dissertation has important theoretical implications for critical cultural audience studies, challenging the mainstreaming theory of television consumption, and demonstrating that media are inextricably embedded in our everyday presentation of self, and reveal as well as construct how we want to be perceived in society. This dissertation also furthers our understanding of how “third world” women contend with the ideologically hostile diasporic space of the U.S., and how these discourses inform the identities that they construct in their new homes.