

John Western, A Passage to England (1992)

IDENTITY

The only other unanimity was all of the immigrant generation terming themselves "Barbadian" (except, naturally enough, Jamaica-born Edith Simmons). Only five of the younger generation—three fully, two with reservations—identified themselves as Barbadian. These, logically enough, were the five who were born in Barbados. Thus all of those born in Barbados of whichever generation assented to the label "Barbadian," whereas none of the half dozen British-born so identified her- or himself. The term "black" came within a whisker of a full score for both generations, only one person in each disagreeing. In the younger set, it was Trevor Brathwaite, Jr., who said he was "doubtful" in a way that meant

"no," just as when we reached the term "black British," he said, "Well, I'm British. . . . Very doubtful *no*." Among the immigrants it was Tony Gill who demurred.

The only other term that came so close to total acceptance was "Londoner" for the British-raised: ten out of eleven. The exception is, entirely logically, a person who came to London already aged sixteen: Trevor Brathwaite, Jr. When one takes into account that five of the British-raised were born in Barbados—just as the W. H. Auden of the second epigraph was born in Britain—it is most impressive that four out of these five voluntarily describe themselves by reference to the metropolis; even Colin and Carol Simmons do, who are clearly hoping to return to Barbados. The younger generation, then, in this small nonrandom sample, have two identities they agree upon: "black" and "Londoner." The latter was evidently known to screenwriter Hanif Kureishi in his follow-up to *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a movie entitled *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. (It was released during my year in London, and a lot of it was shot adjoining Westbourne Park Tube station, only two hundred yards from our flat.) In the movie the London-raised protagonist is told by his father, who had eventually returned to South Asia, to come back "to his own country," and that he, the son, isn't English. The son replies that no, he isn't English, he's a *Londoner*, and enumerates to his father the various attractions of the place that make him feel he belongs there: the walks in the parks in the spring, strolling arm in arm with Rosie along the Thames opposite the great buildings on the north bank, going to a psychology seminar with like-minded Londoners, getting cheap returned tickets to the theater . . .

Nigel Pilgrim exemplifies this. Already we have heard him speak approvingly of the *energy* he feels in London (young New Yorkers will empathize). His father Austin had told me,

We sent my son to Barbados when he was four to see his grandparents. He came back a year later. "Did you like it?" we asked. "Daddy, why does grandma let chickens in the house, that's bad, isn't it?" Oh, he's an Englishman, a *Londoner* he is, my son!

Edward Pilgrim also thinks the world of his nephew for his total and comfortable assumption of the style and the mantle of London. More than any other label, Nigel responded to "Londoner."

"Yes, definitely."

"South Londoner?"

"Yeah! The southeast postcode."

"North Londoner?"

A gasp of mock horror: "That would be seriously bad news!"

North of the Thames I don't know it. Even the southwest sector, not really. You can live quite *insular* here. [He continues on in proprietorial vein about London, and then says,] You always know when winter's coming to an end, once those damn noisy French students start clattering the place up!" [This is offered with a grin; we both roar with laughter at his Blimpish sentiments.]

Clive Carter is a Barbadian friend of John Simmons whom I met at the latter's house one evening. As we chatted, John opined that his children probably belonged in Britain, even though he "would fly back tomorrow" to Barbados. Clive responded,

My kids didn't like Barbados much. I mean, it was nice, but they missed London. They always say there's so much to *do* in London. No, well, we don't talk about these things very much with them. . . . They like the privacy of London. No one asks your business. But in Barbados, oh yes . . . !

Marie Pilgrim was feeling similar qualms when we met in May 1989, she having recently retired, and wondering for just how much longer Austin will remain in his very good Underground job before they go back to the house they're building overlooking the Atlantic coast of Barbados.

Marie: "I bought Nigel his Barbados passport as a present. He can have the British one too. I'd love him to come out to live."

Austin: "But I can't see it, he's a Londoner. There's so much here. I mean, even me, I've lived the major part of my life in London. When I'm in other parts of England, I think, 'I can't wait to get back to London.'"

Marie: "Yes, he [Nigel] likes the job in Liverpool very much, he's doing well, but he wants to be back in London after three years, he says."

Even upon the immigrant generation London makes its claims. These persons arrived in a virtually white metropolis, remember, at an average age of twenty-four, blacks from distant Barbados. Yet today over one-third of them give approval to their designation as "Londoners" (one being Austin Pilgrim, who's just mentioned his comfortableness with London in the quotation above). Four even give full assent to a *local* London designation: "north Londoner" or whatever. Four also of the British-raised—one being Barbados-born—are specific in this way. This seems to indicate some significant allegiance: "More substantial areas of [people's] identities," writes Anthony Cohen (1985), are met "as you go 'down' this scale,"³ that is, become ever more local. Still to be kept in mind, however,

is the opening theme of this chapter: the context. Thus young Derek Gill, talking with me in Canon's Park, did assent vigorously to "north Londoner"; but he had also earlier said that when he was in New York he "thought back about London *as a whole*" (my emphasis).

Three other terms gain high but not unanimous acceptance: in order, "West Indian," "British," and "immigrant." "West Indian" gains wide approval from both generations. Entirely logically, its weakest appeal is among the British-born young, whereas four out of five of the Barbados-born young assent to being "West Indian" (the exception is unsurprisingly—given his remarks at the end of Chapter 9—once again Trevor Brathwaite, Jr.). All except two of the immigrant generation so assent, nearly all of them in a neutral, straightforward manner; if one is a Barbadian (as one is), then *ipso facto* one is a West Indian. Tony Gill, the railway rolling stock supervisor, was an exception in actually *stressing* West Indianness over Barbadianness.

Barbadian, I don't put a lot of emphasis on being a Barbadian. In my job you can't afford that kind of thing, that island rivalry. Everyone should know that Antigua and Trinidad are so different in every way, but so what?

West Indian, yes, that's it. . . . Let me tell you. There was a toilet in a coach that had to be put right. I had it down to be done in one time-slot. When I asked, it hadn't been. I called in the plumber. I knew he was a Barbadian. "Well, I've done *my* bit," he says. Now the job is such that it's first the coach repairer, then the plumber, then the coach repairer again. The repairer hadn't put it together again. Why not? Because the plumber hadn't told him he'd finished. Why not? Because the plumber won't speak to the coach repairer because the plumber's a Barbadian and the coach repairer is a Jamaican and the coach repairer once insulted Barbados!

I wonder if Tony Gill ever chides that closest of all close friends of his, Austin Pilgrim, over the latter's island chauvinism?

With the slightest of smiles, Trevor Brathwaite, Sr., said, "We always called ourselves British." Over two-thirds of the immigrants assented to such a designation. All except one of the British-born young agreed: Colleen Wright, for ideological reasons, said no, the term for herself she was most comfortable with was "Rasta." She would accept "black" and "Londoner" (recall her fondness for Wembley). She gave very qualified assent to another term, "Afro-Caribbean," by adding, "If it's on a form and I had to." For "British" it was "No. Not unless I had to write it on a form." Every other term met a flat negative from her. Of the five Barbados-born but British-raised young, two assented to "British," three eschewed it; of

these three, two, logically enough, were Colin and Carol Simmons, ostensibly planning to return to Barbados.

Thus, whether or not they plan to return to Barbados, most of the immigrant generation choose to call themselves "British." All were born "British subjects" in a colonial territory. All, as we have seen in chapter 2, were schooled in things British. Most still, despite some negative experiences in Britain, keep faith with the Union Jack. Neatly illustrating the general remarks concerning context in this chapter's introduction, Alan Maycock told me,

If I went abroad I'd see myself as British. If I'm living here, I see myself as a foreigner. Because the indigenous British see me as a foreigner. Or half the time I feel like that because of them. The other half you say to yourself, "I pay my taxes, I'm as British as they are."

Edith Simmons laughed at the term "British," but then said, yes, she was. Then she added, "It gets to me, you know. *You never belong*. They change the law, they'll push you back down the ladder. They can change the law and that'll wipe everything out."⁴ The particular focus of this resentment and suspicion was the introduction of a stipulation that from January 1, 1988, tightened up British citizenship requirements for resident Commonwealth and Irish citizens. "D-Day Dec. 31: Sign Up for Citizenship," called the *Caribbean Times* (December 11, 1987), warning that "many black people living here could be rendered 'residents without status' by a government whose xenophobia knows no bounds." A particular annoyance was the £60 registration fee exacted, for what many considered a right.

To the question, was she British, Beverly Brathwaite replied matter-of-factly, "Well, I *was*. . . . Barbados is independent now. Yes, I am." To the next label offered, "foreigner," she replied with more animation: "You're always a foreigner in this country!" Sandra Gill agreed: "British? Yes. But although I have British citizenship I still think of myself as a West Indian. Foreigner? I still think I'm a foreigner. [She laughed lazily, apparently not mightily concerned.] To the British I'm a foreigner." Yet to the next term offered, "Londoner," she was decidedly positive. I wonder if that has anything to do with there being no gatekeepers to officially evaluate one's Londonness; that is, there is nobody who can officially reject that claim (or charge a £60 fee), nobody who can put one down. To see oneself as a Londoner is an entirely voluntary taking on of a mantle . . . which I suppose could be sloughed off again if one wished.

That "foreigner" followed directly upon "British" in the questionnaire list was not in any way contrived. But despite the fortuitous juxtaposition

of these antonyms, over one-third of immigrant interviewees assented to *both*, one or two even chuckling at the contradiction they saw themselves immediately getting into. Unlike logically segmentary pairs like "Londoner" and "British," or "Barbadian" and "West Indian"—which depend on the context, à la collapsing or expanding telescope—"foreigner" and "British" *do* seem irreconcilable, inconsistent. This is further suggested by one-quarter of the immigrant interviewees giving *partial* assent to "foreigner." Partial assents are quite revealing. They frequently indicated, it seemed to me in the interviews, uncertainty and uncomfortable-ness. The only other terms with which so many immigrant interviewees didn't really know how to deal were the "class" terms. One-third of them gave "middle class" partial assent—I got a feeling of "Well, yes, maybe we are, sort of, but it would be a bit uppity to actually come out and say it"—and "working class" received five partial assents. George Farley's responses ran thus. Was he English? "No-oh" (without conviction). Middle class? "No." British? "Well, we are English." Foreigner? "Yes and no." Londoner? "Sort of." Here is much confusion, or if that is too judgmental a word, ambiguity.

Of the British-raised generation, three considered themselves foreigners, two being Barbados-born: Carol Simmons, who came aged seventeen, and Paula Farley, who came aged eleven. Even Colleen Wright, the Wembley-born Rastafarian—whose figurative citizenship is elsewhere than in the "Babylon" (a term she hardly used at all) in which she presently resides—was prepared to grudgingly concede "British" on a form. No, the British-born person who did not consider himself British was Max Springer.

British? No. Foreigner? Yes. . . . It's a strange sort of thing. In England black people have only been here for thirty, forty years, and England has a long history. It's not like America, blacks have been there almost as long as whites. I don't feel British, even though I'm not bothered by it. I'm an immigrant—that's how I feel. And they don't accept me. People—white people—sometimes ask, "Where do you come from?" "England," I reply. "No, where do you *really* come from?" . . . So . . . I feel like a person, well, who's here and you've gotta do the best you can . . .

One other twist the reader will have picked up on in a number of the preceding quotes is that almost none of the immigrant generation consider themselves "English." The term got two partial mentions, that's all; whereas "British" got one partial, and *sixteen* full. "We're not English, oh no! We're *British*," said Audley Simmons.⁵ He spoke for many; "English"

for them implies white people. In the younger generation, none of the Barbados-born and only half of the British-born said they were English. Their claim to Englishness, if based on the birthright of *jus soli*, is incontrovertible. But the other three English-born said no, they weren't English. Perhaps they see Englishness more as an attribute ruled by *jus sanguinis*, available only by approved descent, and from which they are therefore barred. (My impressionistically gathered opinion is that a majority of the white English, especially older persons, would be only too pleased to agree with them in this latter interpretation.)

Once again, I believe I perceive here a real ambiguity and inconsistency. That is, for a white using these terms, the logical segmentary-system rule applies smoothly: I am English in Scotland, but British in Germany. The English-British distinction means something altogether different for the black interviewees, however. Belonging is questionable, the unproblematic segmentary rule doesn't apply here. Nor does it hold for them—as it would for a white person—at one step down the scale either: if one is a Londoner, one cannot, does not, ipso facto claim to be English.

The third of the high acceptance terms, after "West Indian" and "British," is "immigrant." There is, unsurprisingly, a generational split here. Three-quarters of the migrant generation assented, whereas only one-third of the British-raised younger generation did. I say "assented" because the term "immigrant" was hardly *claimed* by the interviewees; it was admitted. "Yes. Hmm . . . I have to be. It is true," ruminated Alan Maycock. Everyone knows the burden of this term, the way it is used to deny full participatory rights in a British society that considers itself *not* to be made up of immigrants. As Gerald Marzorati deftly wrote (*New York Times Magazine*, January 29, 1989) of the parallel case of Asian migrants to Britain, "'Asian' suggests not only the distance the immigrants have traveled but also the distance at which they remain." As Austin Pilgrim complained, with a (to me) novel angle:

Immigrant? Yes. You're always told. . . . But all these English people here in London, when they came to London they had nothing. They pretended that they'd always had a nice car and a big house and a son at public school,⁶ they'd like to pretend that. But they were immigrants here too, but they give themselves superior airs.

Audley Simmons was one of the minority who refused to use the term: "Call me a 'first-class settler' instead!"

And Jeff Bannister really caused me to bend my mind a different way in considering the term. In my liberal manner I'd always, qua Marzorati, felt it to be a mean-spirited, confining label. Jeff rejected the label from

a direction I had never thought of: "No. It has connotations of going to a country and having made up your mind to stay there for the rest of your life. And I haven't done that. I always said one day I'd go back." In this matter of the term "immigrant," he was underlining that *he* had the choice, and was maybe choosing to decline the offer made to him by British society; it was *he* who was the nonacceptor, whereas I had always assumed West Indians to be the supplicants, and that British society had the choice to be the nonacceptor.

I wondered, then, should I have included the term "sojourner" in my list of labels from which to choose, implying voluntary distancing? Unfortunately, the Bannisters were the last family I met, in August 1988, and it was too late to revise and redo the question. And the term "sojourner" too, although with justification much used in the academic literature when considering matters ethnic—in, say, the societal position of the Chinese shopkeeper in southeast Asian countries—is not a term used in common parlance and has perhaps a rather disconcertingly biblical ring to it.

Some of the Barbados-born of the younger generation assented to the term "immigrant," whereas only Max Springer did of the six British-born. All the other British-born felt as Nigel Pilgrim did. He reacted this way to "immigrant?"

"Of course not. It annoys me when white people here say, 'Where are you from?' I of course say 'London.' Then they say, 'Where are your parents from?' They still think we're not really to be accepted—like that phrase 'second-generation immigrant' of theirs, I mean, *really*!"

"When I go to Cornwall, or even to York [his university], it's like going back twenty years, to hear it from my parents. I was talking to an older woman, a flower seller, in the center of York. We were chatting for a while, about the weather and things and then she said she'd just come back from holiday in the Bahamas and I said, 'Did you like it?' And she said, 'Oh, the sun was wonderful but you know, there were so many black people.' I was flabbergasted. And she didn't even realize what she'd said!"

"Now, that's not so in London. I feel happy for that reason in London. Here there are [considerable] numbers of black people, who are not new, not special, not distinguishable."

"Isn't that part of what makes London London now?"

"Oh yes, absolutely."

London pride welling up again, a solid, spatial base of identity.

Gordon Alleyne reacted to "immigrant" and a number of other terms in a representative manner, but in a more articulate way than most.

"English? Oh God no, definitely not. Middle class? I wouldn't, but others would describe me as that, I know. British? Yes. Foreigner? No. Londoner? Yes. Cockney? No. Barbadian? . . . " He thinks; he came to Britain aged seven. "Yes. Immigrant? That's technically what I am, but it's not part of how I view myself. Colored? Oh God no, I hate that word. West Indian? Yes."

"Isn't that an old-fashioned, colonial term?"

"I don't mind it."

"Others do. Because, I guess, it's a name given to a colonially imposed unity, I mean defined as the *British* West Indies. And a name given because of the Europeans' geographical mistake anyway—I mean, they thought it might be to do with India, didn't they?"

"Oh, that's too political, too clever. I think that kind of stuff is counter-productive."

"Would you apply the term 'black' to yourself?"

"Yes. . . . But . . . ah . . . am I naïve because I don't *think* of myself as black? In a way, there's none so oppressed as those who feel themselves oppressed. Paranoia develops, and then you truly *are* oppressed."

"These labels, like 'black,' they're just another way of confining people, of pinning people down, of limiting people's potential. I hate it if people have it in their mind that I'm *exotic*, as a gay black person. I hate it if someone comes to chat me up, not because I'm Gordon and I'm 6'1", but because I'm black."

Thus does Gordon strike out for his own individually won definition of himself, a definition to which gayness is central. Gordon had the most nonblack set of close friends and his partner was white. Gordon saw his parents as belonging to a world, an era, to which he did not belong, and which he said he didn't find interesting: "Their expectations and self-image and hopes and aspirations have been very different from mine. It's difficult if not impossible to compare."

The resounding uncomfortableness of the immigrant generation with class terms has already been noted. (It is a discomfort they share with very many other British people, as I reported of my own parents in chapter 1.) "Middle class" got only two full assents but *eight* partial ones. "Working class" seemed less presuming: eleven full assents, five partial ones. These numbers don't add up. That's because there were six immigrants who equivocated that they were both, or partly, middle class and working class. "I still see myself as working class," said Pauline Alleyne, "but professionally I'm middle class. The kids disagree with me. 'Oh, c'mon mum,' they say, 'you act middle class, think middle class. . . .'" Similarly, a report in the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine* (October 27, 1985) on

"Britain's New Middle Class," had a photograph of the Eversley family in middle-class repose in their comfortable and substantial living room (the attractive blue and yellow trident-bearing Barbadian flag stood atop a glass-doored, polished-wood cabinet). "But I would prefer," Owen Eversley, Jr., is quoted as saying, "the term 'progressive, thinking black people' to 'middle class' . . . For a black person to be described as 'middle class' would be construed as opting-out, ceasing to be black." Because the vast majority of the immigrants came to do jobs of working-class tenor and stuck with them if they could, so the modern British Afro-Caribbean community took the designation "working class" as the group's birthright, as it were.

Their children seem less confused, or perhaps it's less embarrassed, about such a discussion. Nobody gave any partial assents. Also, two-thirds of them—British-born or Barbados-born makes no difference—see themselves as middle class rather than as working class, the converse of their parents. Only one of the British-born, but three of the Barbados-born, saw themselves as working class. Once again, however, the numbers didn't add up, but this time it was due to only one person's ambiguous responses: Paula Farley, without batting an eyelid, said yes, she was middle class; and half a minute later, oh yes, she said, she was working class!

Maybe part of the uncertainty over class labels also stems, straightforwardly, from the elusiveness of the terms after nine years of Thatcherism. There was much fluidity: the meaning of well-tried indicators like trade union membership or monetary income or ownership of stocks and shares was less distinct. And certainly in my own mind, there was and is much uncertainty as to just what I meant when I asked them whether they were middle or working class. It's not as if there's some threshold, a definite score to achieve from some sociologist's portmanteau of variables (years of formal education, home ownership, domestic meal patterns, etc., etc.), that once reached, tips one over, titrationlike, into "the middle class" from "the working class." And of course the interviewees themselves, although I have fuzzily referred to them all as middle class, do vary along a continuum. Consider Beverly and Trevor Brathwaite, she with that unenviable string of tough jobs and four children, he over thirty years driving buses, living in the only house they've ever owned, on a modest terraced street in Southall. The respectable working class? Yet they sent Trevor, Jr., to a private school in Barbados where he learned "the proper English," and Tommy, their youngest, is now off to college and informs me that one of his favorite recreations is skiing!

The Pilgrims also live in the only home they've ever owned, also on a somewhat middling, but modern, quiet terraced cul-de-sac. Yet their son was sent to a major London-area public school with great success, and you

could never get Austin to drive any car other than a Volvo . . . but his greatest joy is vegetable gardening in the nearby council allotment garden. The Maycocks seem by contrast to be indubitably middle class. Alan was perfectly happy with the label "middle class" and gave a definite no to "working class." To which Althea also gave a "no," but to "middle class" just gave a big laugh and said nothing. Their having moved from a house they owned in Croydon to a newer, bigger one in Surbiton in order to be in a better school district; their comfortable leafy Surrey neighborhood from which they both commute to Waterloo station each weekday morning; their daughter off to college; Alan's considerable back garden, its large manicured lawn, flowering borders resplendent, and kitchen vegetable patch partly concealed modestly at the far end, all this to me signifies "middle class"—as does Alan's unselfconscious use of language patterns such as "one asks oneself," delivered in an almost fruity English accent whose Barbadian echoes are very faint.

The last handful of terms to be looked at include the label "colored," which just over one-third of the migrant generation would use of themselves, whereas a slightly smaller proportion of the British-raised generation would. Conversely, the more modern designation "Afro-Caribbean" was accepted by one-half of the British-raised, but by less than one-third of the migrant generation: "I don't go for that one; Caribbean's okay, but not the Afro," harrumphed Sandra Gill. And the term "black British" is acceptable to five out of six of the British-born, but to *none* of the five Barbadian-born of the younger generation. Of their parents, less than one-quarter are prepared to use it—even though overall they were quite well disposed toward "British" and virtually unanimous for "black." Is there some connotation, political or otherwise, with which they are not happy once the two terms are combined? "Don't know why they have to stick the 'black' on it," grumbled Trevor Brathwaite, Sr., who considered himself British, and who, to "Are you black?", responded unenthusiastically, "Suppose so, yes." Perhaps Barbados memories of "black" meaning undesirably dark skin pigment were obtruding. Or perhaps "black British" intimates some second-class, hyphenated, "not truly British" status in their eyes?

A final thought arises on the self-designations people chose. Were these indeed self-designations, or were they too much my suggestions? That is, if one had given the interviewees a pencil and a blank piece of paper and said, "Write down those terms by which you would be pleased to identify yourself," what kind of responses might one have received? One answer I do believe I could with certainty foresee would be "gay" from Gordon Alleyne. During a wide-ranging conversation in June 1988 in Gordon and

Ted's Earl's Court flat, the perceived conservatism of Barbados society weighed on Gordon's mind for a most evident reason:

I'm better off for having come here. . . . There's more space in London for me to fit into as a gay—less likely elsewhere in the U.K. and, I'd guess, Barbados. . . . I might find I don't like it now. I'm slightly nervous, and slightly looking forward, to going in October. . . . Yes, I *am* apprehensive about going. . . .

A major disappointment in my week's visit to London in May 1989 is that by ill-fortune it coincided with a ten-day vacation Gordon and Ted had taken out of the country, so I couldn't meet them again to hear about their Barbados trip. I did, however, hear about it secondhand, from Gordon's parents.

"We talked about it quite a bit with Gordon and Ted beforehand. He [Gordon] hadn't been there since 1976. We warned them about the old people, that they'd be conservative. And, funny thing, it was the young who were rude. They'd say things loudly as Ted and Gordon would walk by. Ted said he couldn't understand the dialect but he knew they were sneering. They didn't know if it was because they were gay or because they were black and white together. Ted thought it was racism. He was very hurt about it. 'Well,' I [Pauline] said to him, 'now you know what it was like for us here in the sixties!'"

"Oh, *Pauline!*" I objected, "that wasn't very nice, when the guy's already hurting."

"No. . . . Well. . . ." She continued without appearing chastened. She likes Ted, who seems a good, pleasant man; but I got the definite impression that in her view such a lesson wouldn't do any white person any harm.

"But the old people were all right, never said anything, were nice and polite. It was the young. They were staying with my family, it was fine, they didn't ask questions. They hardly saw Orville's family: *they* wouldn't like it, wouldn't know what to do."

"They were out in a country area, that's why. Well, countryside: edge of town, edge of Christ Church. If they'd been in the hotel area along the coast no one would have bothered."

"Isn't that why London's so good for Gordon? No one bats an eyelid here, you can live your own style?"

"Oh yes, you'd never get Gordon out of London! He'll never move. He's a Londoner, absolutely."