

Nadine Matthews interviewed by Jacob Matthews  
March 23, 2020  
Brooklyn, New York

Jacob Matthews: My name is Jacob Matthews, and I'm interviewing Nadine Matthews in Brooklyn, New York on today's date Monday March twenty-third, twenty-twenty. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Nadine Matthews: Yes, I do.

JM: All right, all right. So, where did you grow up?

NM: I grew up in Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies.

JM: Why did you leave your country of origin?

NM: Well, my mother migrated here first, to The United States of America in the '80s, in 1988. And then after doing so, of course, you know being, we were sent for, so you didn't have a choice in the matter basically, but to come. So, I did.

JM: What do you miss about your country of origin?

NM: The weather, for sure. The beaches and family.

JM: What don't you miss about your country of origin?

NM: That's what I...

JM: No! What DON'T you miss?

NM: Oh! That's the next question?

JM: Yeah so what don't you miss? So what do you miss and what you don't miss? So what do you not miss about Trinidad?

NM: Oh. What I don't miss. Well, what I don't miss is the mosquitoes, the heat and I love my country so there ain't much really

JM: Ok.

NM:...That I don't miss.

JM: What did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

NM: I didn't have much of a chance to say that I was leaving. It was like a real last minute, quick decision, thing. So, you know, I didn't really have that to say to much

family and stuff that I was leaving. So the ones who did know was like: 'All right well, girl you going to America, you know, make the best of it'. What else do they tell you, you know?

JM: What were your expectations of The United States?

NM: Ugh, well that for sure was a shellshocked. I really thought I was coming to a place where I would see lots of huge, big houses, big walls, fancy cars for each house. Not coming seeing all these, when I came of JFK, it was a real shellshocked for me. My hopes, my dreams, my expectations were totally crushed, with what I saw. You know, I always picture America as like a postcard, you know? The postcards I used to get when I was a young girl back home growing up where you would always see these beautiful snow landscapes, nice pictures of these beautiful houses, and that kind of thing. Then I got out of JFK, started traveling, and saw all these buildings, all these houses, all this stuff and it was a real shellshocked. I wanted to go back to home right then.

JM: So, can you tell me about your journey? So in this case, the flight and everything. Did it all go according to plan?

NM: Did it all go according to plan? It pretty much did. Like I say, it was kinda lonely. Normally back then going to the airport, you would've had like an entourage about thirty or forty people following you. That's like if the family really knew that you were going beforehand. In my case, as I said, nobody really knew I was going, so it was just myself, my aunt, the taxi driver, and my uncle. The taxi driver was my uncle's friend at the time, Uncle Roy at the time. And my friend at the time. And that was it. So basically, I went in, went off. No big entourage at the waving gallery which we had at the airport at that time to wave me goodbye, no nothing so it was kind of bitter-sweet, you know? Not knowing what I was coming to, the first flight leaving out of Trinidad and Tobago, not knowing what I'm coming to and, so it was kind of, you know, scary and yet happy, you know? Exciting, not knowing but I made it.

JM: When and with whom did you come to New York City?

NM: When did I come to New York City? To be exact, I came to New York City on October third, 1988. And to whom or with whom? I came with no one. I pretty much traveled by myself. But I came to my mom and my brother, eldest brother, and his girlfriend at the time. I met them, they met me. My mom met me at the airport. At JFK airport.

JM: All right. How did New York--well you kind of already answered this but how did New York City meet and fail to meet your expectations?

NM: Well, as I described earlier, you know, expectations were totally down. It wasn't what I expected in the sense of buildings, landscape, cleanliness, totally didn't meet up to my expectations then. 'Cause here I am thinking I'm going to this real huge, big-city--America. The place everybody always wants to come so you figure, when you reach,

you walking out, you know, you're getting out to this immaculate place. People would walk differently, talk differently, look different, you know? But it was all just in our little minds growing up I guess, you know? Wasn't reality. Nothing came to reality.

JM: Ok. So how were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically and The United States in general?

NM: Say that again.

JM: So for the first half of the question: Like, how were you received when you arrived into your neighborhood? So like the first neighborhood...

NM: In America?

JM: Right. So the first neighborhood you went to, so in this case, I'm guessing it was...

NM: Oh. Like Brooklyn?

JM: Yeah. So, like, how were you received?

NM: It was quiet! The neighborhood I went to when I first came here, I went to East Flatbush. East thirty-second street and Avenue H to be exact. That was my first landing point from JFK airport. That's where we took the taxi and that's where it brought us. That's where I stayed--I lived there. In a building there, you know? Was the first time living in an apartment building...

JM: That was the same one that Herschel...?

NM: Yes. You know Shandra lived on the very first floor as you go up the two little steps?

JM: Yeah.

NM: The first apartment on your right.

JM: Yeah.

NM: That was Shandra's apartment so I stayed there. And--\*Phone rings\*

NM: It was quiet. It was very quiet and you know, that was about it really. I had no friends, remember, I'm now coming in so I have no friends, I have no, there was no family really here or anything to interact with so it was just me. It was kind of a lonely life for quite a while. For quite a while it was a lonely, lonely life.

JM: All right so how were you received in The United States in general?

NM: Not great. That's just my perception, you know? Because my brother was working already, my mom was working, my sister-in-law was working. There's no one around to do anything or take me anywhere or you know? So I stayed home in an apartment and watched TV all day--all night, slept all day. And I kind of found myself a way around and learned the city, learned Brooklyn, learned the train, learned the bus, learned everything on my own, you know?

JM: Right and how did you adjust to the new culture of New York City?

NM: Gradually, but I think all-in-all I did very well. With time.

JM: All right. What new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in New York?

NM: I really thought there would have been more opportunities for me then. But on the factor of coming, not having legal status, there were not many opportunities for me, you know? At least, nobody informed me. The kind of things that they told me made me just stay under radar, you know? So I didn't see any opportunities.

JM: So when there were opportunities, were denied any? Like, because you were an immigrant?

NM: I wish there were opportunities and if there were that I really had known about them because leaving my country I came as a newly graduated student of cosmetology classes, both basic and advanced. Graduated with certificates--top of the class and I really left there coming with the expectation that I would've been able to come here and further it. But when I came here, they started to tell me: 'Oh, don't talk loud on the train. Don't this, don't that...', you know? 'Because if anything, the immigration...', so that made me very timid, that made me scared so I never asked anybody anything, there were no schools, I never--and now only later to realize all these years to realize that was so untrue. I could've gone to school. I could've--you know. But when people don't give you the right information or you're scared or you're afraid to go out and ask the right sources, it can really put a hamper on your life or your dreams or your expectations or the things that you could get, you know--look or do.

JM: Where have you lived in New York City and why? NM: I have always lived in Brooklyn, New York since I arrived in America. I mean, I have lived in different areas. I've lived East Flatbush, I have lived Crown Heights, I have lived Canarsie, I'm now back in Flatbush again--East Flatbush. Always lived in Brooklyn! Never lived out because I guess it's the first place I landed when I came here and it's what I know as home and also it has a lot of my Caribbean roots here in Brooklyn, you know?

JM: All right. Lemme see... What was the hardest part about your move to New York City?

NM: Leaving my so loved... What should I say? What would've been my cosmetology school or should I have said--what is the word I'm looking for? What would've been my profession! I did that with such passion, such love, and I was looking forward, if I had stayed in my country, I would've been a top of the ladder, they would say, you know? I aspired top of my class. I was really looking to build a future into that their and I think by coming here, it set me back instead of putting me forward, you know? So that was the hard--I didn't want to come when my mom say 'come here' because I was just finishing up that and I was looking forward to doing my own business and stuff home like having my own beauty shop and, you know? And then, BOOM! In a spur of the moment to leave there to come here so sudden and end that just so, that was a hard part for me, you know?

JM: What's your favorite part about living in New York?

NM: Favorite part about living in New York? I still don't know if I have a favorite part about living in New York. If I had the opportunity and the money that I would like today or tomorrow, I would go back home, live in Tobago. I went to school in Tobago, I lived in Tobago also and if you give me the chance today or tomorrow, I'd probably pack up and head back home. 'Cause I don't know if I have a favorite part about living in New York--I mean, hey, things are much more accessible, you know? Things are much more accessible in New York. Let's be real. Compared to where we live back home. You know everything is at hand. You might find something more affordable and stuff but I mean there's nothing here that in my country you can't get. Once you have the money, you can get it, you know? So...

JM: How has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

NM: Oh, big time neighborhood has changed. Really, really changed--in the sense of buildings. The spaces that used to be there aren't there no more. It is much busier now than it used to be back then. Business-wise, you know? A lot of the places that I once knew, not there anymore. So when I arrived, it was one thing and now that, like, you guys are here, I could take you places and show you and tell you what was there but it's not there anymore, you know? So building change, scenery changes, you know? It makes it different now.

JM: Lemme see. I want to end on a--lemme see. Lemme see some... Ok! What would you change about the U.S. Immigration System?

NM: I think I would change the visa system probably and maybe still have a visa but in a sense that it's easier to obtain and make it that people can come and go, you know, easier. Then, we wouldn't want to really come and stay here sometimes without going back to where we come from. Because in my case, when I came, I had a--I think a year visa and I came at the time when that visa had like about, three months left on it again, you know? Just when it was about, almost expired. So I had to travel. But I really wish I had more time on it because I wouldn't have stayed here. Coming and seeing and

realizing that there wasn't anything for me here at the young age of sixteen then and there was nothing really that I liked about the place and nothing--I didn't want to stay here. I wanted to go back home. Maybe, you know, I might've gone back and come back, and you know? Do that sort of--being able to, my mom would have been able to see me then, you know? On a yearly basis or so. I would just come on a visitor visa. But it's hard to obtain a visa and they're just making it even harder so I wish they would rethink that, you know? There are a lot of people who don't really care to come here and really stay here. But because their way of doing things and stuff makes people make some decisions that they make. So they need to think about that and reform that.

JM:Alright, real thing. That's gonna conclude the interview