
Feminist Africa 7: Diaspora Voices



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Feminist Africa is a unique forum for progressive, cutting-edge feminist intellectual dialogue and gender research on the African continent. It offers a space for theoretical and strategic debates that challenge the prevailing technocratic approaches to global development, and the reductionism of economic and policy approaches that neglect the lived realities, ingenuity and cultural production of Africa's diverse and dynamic peoples. *Feminist Africa* challenges the shared continental history of exploitation and marginalisation by attending to the complex cultures of resistance and local strategy that characterise the postcolonial era, while at the same time remaining attentive to the shifting global geopolitical configurations of power.

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From 2005 onwards, two issues will be produced per annum, in accordance with themes specified in the calls for contributions.

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Please do not include graphics.

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Editorial

Rhoda Reddock



Reflections on the meanings of diaspora

In 2005 the African Union (AU) officially recognised a role for the African diaspora in the future of continental Africa. That same year it adopted *The African Protocol on Women*, a document which seeks to enhance women's human rights across the Union. These official actions by a body representing the vision of a more unified Africa marks a new stage in a history of uneven, ambivalent but ever present interactions, conversations and collaborations between Africa and its diaspora as well as a renewed commitment to gender equity on the continent.

After much deliberation, the African Union in 2005, agreed to the following definition of the African diaspora – “*peoples of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union*”. It includes communities created by the movements and cultures of persons from the continent of Africa and their descendants throughout the world – Asia, The Pacific, Europe and the Americas including United States and Canada, the Caribbean, South and Central America.

The concept of diaspora itself is a highly contested one and has become increasingly interesting to scholars in recent times. James Clifford includes it among “an unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretive terms” which now “jostle and converse in an effort to characterize the contact zones of nations, cultures, and regions: such as *border, travel, creolization, transculturation, hybridity and diaspora*” (Clifford, 1994: 303). While the concept emerged initially to refer to the Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersions, in the last few decades the concept has been applied with new vigour to what was perhaps a much earlier dispersion, that of persons from what we now know as the African continent.

There is continued debate on what precisely can be defined as diaspora; yet Clifford calls for a shift from precise defining characteristics to a focus on discourses of diaspora which focus on both the routes *and* the roots in order

to create a community consciousness and solidarity of difference. In other words diaspora should be seen as “a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (Clifford, 1994: 308). With such an understanding of this concept, it would be interesting to see the extent to which the idea of Africa continues to have resonance in the African diaspora and the forms that this takes. It is also important to track the ways in which this process has been gendered as well as the diversity in the experience of diaspora among sexes, classes, and nationalities.

In some parts of this world, a memory of Africa had long been lost (Wade, 2005) if it ever existed; for example in parts of Central and Latin America e.g. Mexico and in South Asia such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka¹. Yet with the re-emergence of identity politics in the 20th and early 21st Centuries we see an emergence of diaspora consciousness throughout the world including parts of African diaspora where this has not traditionally been the case. The emergence of *Afrodiascent* movements in South and Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean are reflections of this. These have often been accompanied by women’s movements as discussed in the paper by Helen Safa for the case of Brazil. What is important to note is that Africa as a conscious entity did not exist at the time of these earliest dispersions therefore the idea of Africa is something which has had to be constructed in response to the experiences of these dispersed peoples and their descendents in diverse parts of the world. This has been accelerated through the increased movement of people and ideas from the last years of the 19th Century to the globalizing era of the late 20th and 21st centuries.

This action by the African Union, represents in many ways the culmination of decades of work by diaspora activists as well as the recognition of the economic benefits to be derived from the increased interaction with diasporic communities. This is a phenomenon recognised by other countries such as India and China in the wake of newer diasporic movements, as they all seek to maximize the benefits of ancestral belonging which the new identity politics creates even within a context of capitalist globalisation.

Africa’s diaspora has emerged through different disconnected moments, most significantly the forced removal of untold millions in the Trans-Indian Ocean and Transatlantic slave trade(s). More recently these movements have taken place under diverse conditions of “choice” and uncertainty – migration as wage-workers, sex workers, professionals, scholars and exiles from the political and economic challenges which have dogged Africa’s recent history.

Since the early 20th century, the notion of pan-Africanism, originating in the diaspora, has focused on the politics of African identity and resistance in the face of structural systems of racism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. While this has been the focus of much recent reflection and consideration, the important contribution of pan-Africanist women and feminist activists to this movement has not received the attention it deserves (Reddock, 2001; Altink, 2004). Indeed the diasporic connections between one Mrs Kinloch, a South African woman (African) and Henry Sylvestre Williams an Afro-Trinidadian Lawyer resulted in the formation of the African Association in London in 1889 by Williams who first coined the term Pan-African around 1900 (Hooker, 1975; Reddock, 2001²). This Pan-African consciousness and vision would continue throughout the 20th Century through the leadership of men like W. E. B. Dubois; Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, C. L. R. James, and others. One high point of this was the historic 1945 Fifth Pan-African Congress held in London.³ But the movements' relative success was also the result of Caribbean Pan-Africanist feminist women such as Amy Ashwood Garvey and Una Marson (Adi and Sherwood:1995; Reddock, 2001).

Recent scholarship problematises this notion of the African diaspora, and among others, acknowledges the varied and sometimes contradictory ways in which 'blackness' and 'Africanness' is defined, experienced and understood. Paul Zeleza in a paper commissioned by CODESRIA⁴ drew attention to the debates within Africa itself on the definition of Africa citing competing definitions including – "the transatlantic, sub-Saharan, continental, pan-Arab and global definitions of Africa (AU, 2004: 11). He also identified four spatial dimensions of the African diaspora as – the Trans-Indian Ocean; Trans Mediterranean and Trans Atlantic diasporas; and two temporal periods – the prehistoric flows and the modern flows. Finally, while he also recognised the varied bases for these diasporic movements – demographic movements; cultural flows; economic flows; political flows; ideological flows and most importantly the flow of images (AU, 2004: 11). Zeleza's framework for understanding diaspora is useful as it complicates what is often perceived in simplistic terms. He also acknowledges the difficulties first in the definition and then with the meaning of Africa as well as the varying ways in which diaspora is understood and experienced. I would challenge his temporal conceptualisation however, as I would argue for at least four temporal levels – the prehistoric; the pre-modern (14–15th Centuries); the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary migratory movements.

In this recognition of difference, the most obvious differences, those of “gender” and class, appear to have received the least attention of all within the broader scholarship on diaspora and pan-Africanism. Yet since the 1980s, a steady scholarship on women in the African diaspora has emerged. In 1981, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, an anthology edited by Filomena Steady was one of the first of these efforts. In 1996, the reader – *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* edited by Roslyn Terborg Penn and Andrea Benton Rushing appeared also in the USA. In both cases these volumes were published in the USA and included articles on Africa, the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean. Since that time a number of other anthologies emerged including special issues of journals. More recently in November 2005 at Duke University, USA a symposium entitled *Gendering the Diaspora, Race-ing the Transnational* was followed in 2006 at the University of Toronto, Canada by another entitled *Diasporic Hegemonies*. According to the organisers the symposia “brought feminist transnational critique into an extended conversation with scholarship on the African diaspora to think critically about some of the various “hegemonies” that have shaped these fields. Focusing on difference, genealogies, indigeneity, unequal circulations and configurations of culture, power and politics” they sought “to formulate a gendered transnational analysis of the relations of diaspora that rethinks the implications of globalisation in generative and dynamic ways.⁵ In addition the conferences of African and African diaspora Intellectuals organised by the African Union in Jamaica (2005) and Brazil (2006) have included women academics and feminist intellectuals and facilitated new avenues of cooperation and collaboration.

These publications and symposia have provided opportunities for scholars to collaborate cross-culturally and reflect on the diversity as well as the commonalities of the diasporic experience. What is interesting about diasporic actions including scholarship is that they have in the past originated outside of Africa. Today we are seeing more simultaneity in that initiatives are also originating from within the continent. The journal *Feminist Africa* has been an important voice for feminists and scholars within the continent, making a space for continental voices in a world dominated by voices from the North including those of diasporic women. The publication of this issue from within the continent and edited by a woman from the economic South is an important development which opens up new possibilities for South-South collaboration and debate within the African diaspora.

But the diasporic experience is not limited to those of African descent and must include all those who share and inhabit these diasporic spaces. Many

parts of the world are today becoming spaces of inter-locking diasporic communities for example from Asia, Africa, China, Europe and even the Middle East. The papers written by Helen Safa and Theresa Ann Rajack-Talley and the standpoint by Patricia Mohammed are cases in point. This volume sought to recognize this and to include the voices of women who inhabit these complex and multi-ethnic locations..

Diaspora feminisms and the meaning of Africa

This issue set out to explore diaspora feminist engagements with the idea and reality of Africa; the gendered experiences of diaspora populations and the influence of the diaspora on gender relations and feminist engagements *within* Africa. We sought contributions that engaged critically with hegemonic discourses of pan-Africanism, gender and feminism as well as those that problematised the relationships as well as those that build bridges among diaspora populations as well as between Africa and the diaspora. This last aspect is reflected in the paper by Rajack-Talley where she evaluates the contentious discourses on African retentions in relation to the Afro-Caribbean family. In a different way Gillian Marcelle, a Caribbean woman, reflects on her experience in Salvador de Bahia in the street festival of *Lavagem do Bonfim*. Her descriptive reportage resonates with the gender image base on Africa and the Caribbean developed by Edna Bay and Patricia Mohammed and reflected on by the latter as a standpoint in this volume.

Eudine Barriteau on the other hand, examines the relevance of Black Feminist thought not only for the diaspora but for feminist theory generally. Her paper provides what she calls “a long-overdue evaluation and documentation of the contribution of US Black Feminist thought to Feminist thought more generally” and bemoans the continued marginalization of this important school of thought from some mainstream volumes on feminist thought. Black feminist thought, as with much scholarship not originating in the Euro-American North, is often consciously and subconsciously perceived as “ethnic” and therefore relevant only to other “ethnics”. Barriteau argues quite convincingly that black feminist theorizing brings important insights to the process of creating knowledge, not only about black women’s lives, but with relevance to all women’s lives.

As a Caribbean member of a diasporic population I was honoured to have been asked to edit this volume. I am honoured for this opportunity to engage in this global conversation which has Africa as its starting point, reaching

inward and outward, and not the other way around as is often the case. What emerges in this collection is that movement is continuously taking place within the diaspora. The essays, reviews and profiles in this volume address events and themes relating to Brazil, the English-speaking Caribbean, Britain, the United States and Latin America. Interestingly the essays are not necessarily written by women originating in these areas. It suggests first – mobility within the diaspora as well as a concern with issues beyond the geographical boundaries of ones' immediate location.

At the outset efforts were made to attract contributions from geographic locations not often represented in publications on the African diaspora. I was particularly interested in the Indian Ocean diaspora especially as in January 2006, a conference organised by TADIA – The African diaspora in Asia – was held in Goa, India bringing together African diaspora scholars from various parts of the world. This conference, along with a range of other diaspora conferences of various kinds testifies to the significance of issues of nation and identity in the current historical period. But they are also reflections of the efforts of governments of the African Union, and the governments of India and China to capitalize on their diaspora as potential markets; sources of investments, suppliers of trained personnel and other forms of virtual and real support in an increasingly competitive global environment. Of course these diaspora are not pure entities. Many diaspora locations comprise more than one diasporic population. These ancestral pulls therefore have particular meanings for nation states as well as relations among citizens of these nation states.

It is a pity that no contributions were submitted that explore what Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo (1998) refers to as *double Diaspora – those who have formed new diasporic communities in other parts of the world such as Afro-Caribbeans in Central America and North America and Afro, Chinese, Euro and Indo-Caribbeans in North America. More recently scholars have been documenting the movement of African Americans to Israel, pointing to continued processes of *diasporisation* through contemporary processes of globalisation.

The essays in this volume represent both a documentation of the ongoing movements of women of African descent in various parts of the world as well as a celebration of diaspora feminisms; feminist scholarship and the gendered experiences of diasporic lives. They however, also present cogent critiques of movements and individuals reflecting a sensitivity which goes beyond mere celebration that a “sister has made it” to a larger attention to the ethical and moral demands of a movement and women’s responsibilities

to community as well as to social justice and equity on a global scale. Carole Boyce Davies' paper tackles head-on the contradictions of such situations; in this case, the contentious location of Condeleeza Rice, United States Secretary of State. Boyce Davies asks the questions – “What happens when members of a subordinated group rise to power within an oppressive system? Who do these people end up representing? How does a US black woman manage the internal/domestic histories while understanding her location in diaspora and the transnational? (Boyce Davies, this issue)”. Similar feelings of disappointment can be discerned in the standpoint of Anneka Leolyn Marshall in her “Trek for a Sense of Belonging”. In a way this reflects some of the restlessness of the diasporic spirit searching constantly for “home”, no doubt contributing to the “doubled diaspora” phenomenon mentioned earlier.

At the same time the contribution of some outstanding women may be shadowed by their association with influential men, the tribute to Coretta Scott-King, the late widow of Martin Luther King, by Simi Dosekun is a sensitive re-evaluation of one woman's contribution to the cause of social justice in her home country and on the African continent.

The structure of *Feminist Africa* allows for the documentation and critical reflection of its subject matter through a variety of formats – feature articles, standpoints, tributes, profiles, interviews and book reviews; this allows for a lively and comprehensive engagement with key issues. I trust that this volume will do just that in giving voice to Africa's diaspora.

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Footnotes

- 1 See for example the work of the TADIA project – the African Diaspora in India.
- 2 Williams also hosted the First Pan-African Conference in London in 1901 attended among others by W. E. B. DuBois and Anna Julia Cooper (Reddock, 2001).
- 3 Participants at this conference included – Jomo Kenyatta, Nmandi Azikiwe, Obafemi Owolowo, L. T. A. Wallace Johnson among many others (George Padmore in Adi and Sherwood, 1995).
- 4 CODESRIA – Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.
- 5 University of Toronto, Women and Gender Studies Institute, Conference Programme, October 2006 available at <http://www.utoronto.ca/wgsi>.

The relevance of black feminist scholarship: a Caribbean perspective

Violet Eudine Barriteau



Women's studies has offered one major challenge to the allegedly hegemonic ideas of elite white men. Ironically, feminist theory has also suppressed Black women's ideas. Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a unique feminist consciousness about the intersection of race and class in structuring gender, historically we have not been full participants in white feminist organizations (Patricia Hill Collins, 1990: 7).

Introduction

In this article, I speak from a Caribbean feminist location to examine some of the core contributions black feminist scholarship has made to feminist epistemology, and to simultaneously call attention to its near-erasure. I document some of the main conceptual tools and analytical devices black feminist theorising brings to the process of creating knowledge, not only about black women's lives, but with relevance to all women's lives.¹ In the process of stocktaking, of synthesising some of these contributions, I reflect on the politics of knowledge production and what is perhaps the under-explored applicability of black feminist theoretical analyses to comprehending the lives of Caribbean and African women. This article is long overdue, and many of the questions I raise I cannot answer here, and in fact do not have answers for. Rather, I hope this piece will start a conversation about the relevance of black feminist theory to women across nationalities, ethnicities and race. In the process, I hope to contribute to advancing feminist visions, irrespective of the geographic locations in which women experience the dynamic and constantly mutating power relations of gender.

Even as I hold mainstream and Western feminist theorists accountable for the refusal to fully acknowledge the contributions of black feminist theorists, I am compelled to consider whether or not Caribbean² feminist scholarship and practice have engaged with black feminist scholarship – and if not, why not? What are some of the main issues Caribbean feminists attempt to address, and how do these

intersect with the conceptual tools offered by black feminist theorists? Why haven't Caribbean feminists consciously utilised the theoretical tools of black feminist scholarship? How much do we know about these theoretical contributions?

Part of the motivation to write this article comes from a desire to disseminate widely what I see as the strengths of black feminist theory, and to begin to think through why Caribbean feminists have not made more use of it. I have suspicions (many of which I can substantiate) as to why black feminist scholarship is generally missing from the canonical anthologies of feminist theories, but why is it absent in the works of feminists who share an historical legacy of racist and colonial exploitation? Problematising race and exposing how racist practices complicate all other social relations of power is a central organising principle of black feminist theorising. As a black Caribbean woman and feminist, race and racism do not enter my life and the lives of most Caribbean women in the identical trajectories that they do for minority women in racist societies – the geographic and political locations for much of this theorising. This is not to suggest that racism and racist practices are not threaded through the social fabric of Caribbean life. They are, but they are experienced differently. As I stated 14 years ago:

Black women's experiences of race in the Caribbean differ from that of black women in North America. With population composition ranging from 95,4% to 79,9% black in most Caribbean countries³ [White, 1986: 65] there is the legacy of race rather than say the North American version of the day-to-day reality of racism. For example, in Barbados, indigenous whites dominate the corporate economy. They own or control economic activities within major industrial sectors. They maintain a web of corporate interlinkages based on ethnic or kinship ties [see Beckles 1989a]. *Yet for black Barbadians racial discrimination in the areas of health services, education, transportation, housing and public policy is an alien experience* [emphasis added] (1992: 25).

To what extent has the absence of state-sponsored racism in the post-independent Caribbean affected the engagement of Caribbean feminists with black feminist theorising that makes an interrogation of racism central to its analysis? If some feminists claim there is evidence of racism in state practices in certain Caribbean countries, why haven't the theoretical insights of black feminist theory been used to reveal these practices?

As it relates to black feminist theorising, the politics of creating knowledge about women's lives takes an internecine turn. Feminists have been theorising

for centuries to correct the falsity, gendered hegemony and intellectual violence of patriarchal knowledge claims (see, for instance, Spender, 1982; Rossi, 1974; Schneir, 1972; Martin, 1972). Ironically, while most feminist theorists discern quite readily the exclusionary parameters of mainstream (i.e., androcentric) knowledge production, they replicate these exclusionary practices in the new generalisations they offer and the lived realities they investigate to distil these knowledge claims.

A Caribbean feminist perspective

What do I mean by a Caribbean feminist perspective and by describing myself as a Caribbean feminist? It means that I define myself as a black woman, a feminist and a political scientist – who reflects upon and negotiates, operates, theorises, and works within the trenches of gender relations in the Commonwealth Caribbean (Barriteau, 2003b: 57). As a precondition to problematising the intersection where my multiple identities meet Caribbean realities, I believe I have a responsibility to generate new knowledges about Caribbean societies. I locate myself and my analysis at the juncture where regional experiences of rapid changes in the global political economy intersect with fundamental developments in the social relations of gender (Barriteau, 2001). I attempt to work at the crossroads where a politicised, theoretical stance and the competing, complex realities and contradictions of everyday life in the Caribbean meet. I see this location as a ground-level vantage point that enables me to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on rethinking Caribbean society from a feminist perspective. This position enables me to argue that an understanding of the operations of the social relations of gender and gender systems is foundational to any assessment and critique of Caribbean society. It means that I am very interested in North-South relations, and the policies and politics of industrialised countries and their impact on children, women and men in the Caribbean and other southern regions.

Even though Caribbean countries have achieved “flag independence”, and our peoples and most of our leaders truly desire to be sovereign, the Caribbean has not escaped new versions of enduring colonial legacies, some of which have been wilfully maintained by newly minted independent governments (Barriteau, 2004b: 136). We may look and wish to be beyond the political dimensions of colonialism, but many of our leaders and peoples have neither surrendered nor even interrogated the cultural and economic trappings of colonialism.

Even though the economic and political discussions now centre on globalisation, in reality Caribbean countries are suspended somewhere between formal political independence and new forms of colonialism. An equal vote at the United Nations does not necessarily translate into equal treatment in the international arena. The post-Columbian⁴ Caribbean is perhaps the original geopolitical configuration of globalisation. For more than five centuries, Caribbean realities have been violently punctured, punctuated and systemically redefined by international economics, politics and cultures. Though decimated and plundered by and since the Columbian intrusion, the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean managed to survive alongside migrants from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the near, far and Middle East.

In the 21st century, the Caribbean can still be comprehended as a misunderstood metaphor for the global. Misunderstood because as the ongoing processes of globalisation convulse, conquer and reconfigure commerce, cultures and citizenship, the Caribbean is increasingly neglected in internationalised, intellectual discourse and enterprise. Continuing to assess and reflect on the post-Columbian Caribbean would yield important lessons to the global community. One obvious but overlooked lesson is that in this confrontational world, the Caribbean exists as a zone of peace. This is part of the larger context in which particular issues affecting Caribbean feminism are played out.

Issues in Caribbean feminism

What concerns of Caribbean feminism can benefit from taking up the conceptual tools of black feminist theory? As reflected in the literature, much Caribbean feminist scholarship centres on Caribbean states, and state neglect of Caribbean women or complicity in issues negatively affecting women (see, for example, Reddock, 1994; Barriteau, 1995; 2004a; Bailey, 2003; Harris, 2003; Pargass and Clarke, 2003; Vassell, 2003; Maxine Henry-Wilson, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Rowley, 2004). A special issue of *Feminist Review*, entitled “Rethinking Caribbean Difference”, reveals additional concerns of Caribbean feminist theorising from interdisciplinary perspectives. Pat Mohammed locates the politics of identity as a central concern of feminism and feminist theory in the Caribbean (1998: 6). She also signals an unexplored demarcation of Caribbean and black feminist concerns when she cautions that she “cannot speak for or in the manner of a white middle-class academic in Britain, or a black North American feminist”, even though she shares with both similarities that go beyond societal difference, and which are fuelled by shared commitment

to gender equality (1998:6). Hilary Beckles charges that Caribbean feminist theorists have failed to investigate why “institutional political projects such as independence took hegemonic precedence over women’s liberation” (1998: 48). He specifically challenged me to “redefine and relocate Caribbean women’s movements within the ideological space provided by postmodern feminism in order to create and promote social activism that reflects a coherent feminist opposition and vanguard” (1998: 51–52).

Rhoda Reddock explores and links the emergence of women’s organisations and the development of feminist consciousness in the 20th-century Commonwealth Caribbean. She traces the evolution and changing character of women’s organisations over the last two centuries, while highlighting the emergence of small radical or feminist-oriented groups (1998: 57, 61–62). Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen undertakes a critique of Caribbean feminism as largely Afro-centric and argues that the women’s movement should reflect the experiences of women of other ethnic groups in the region: “The Caribbean post-independence and feminist discourses gave pre-eminence to the historical experiences and present-day situation of African-Caribbean people, leading to an Afro-centric rather than a multicultural paradigm” (1998: 83).

In a 2002 keynote address, I attempted to capture some of the challenges of Caribbean feminism as follows:

1. To unravel the knot that surrounds power, and to investigate how our difficulty with power influences what issues receive our attention; to grapple with feminists’ ambivalence over power, how we come to power, claim it, respect it, and use it.
2. To begin to rethink the processes we can develop and use to ensure that democratic practices define how we create knowledge, and how we expose and avoid replicating the hierarchies of power in the social relations we seek to disrupt.
3. To be aware that feminist scholarship and activism has to be distinguished by a commitment to interrogating, picking apart and honestly confronting how power works. In whatever avenues we work, we have to acknowledge that we are contesting and seeking to change relations of power.
4. The need to establish genealogical authority and continuity between feminist thought and gender studies. This is not a quest for theoretical primogeniture. It is about identifying conceptual frameworks that recognise and explore those relations of power that shape how women and men experience the same social and economic phenomena in fundamentally dissimilar and unequal ways.

5. To maintain and support meaningful dialogue with the study, issues and questions of masculinities. We need to create a space within which to converse with masculinity beyond the necessary, but generally reactive responses that have been generated so far.
6. To tackle the knot of race/ethnicity/class, and deconstruct an us/them frame of analysis, which must transcend its origins in a post-colonial, nationalist treatise.
7. To engage with the challenge of class, another social relation of power and privilege that has not yet been satisfactorily interrogated in our work.
8. To address the fragility and vulnerability of the women's movement in the face of a frontal assault on Caribbean women that goes beyond a backlash (Barriteau, 2003c).
9. The withdrawal of state attention from women and women's issues in a majority of Caribbean countries. Many states believe they have fulfilled their mandates towards women and must now focus increasingly on men.
10. The similar retreat from a focus on women by international development institutions.
11. The weaknesses in both scholarship and activism in linking the adversities in women's lives to larger structures of oppression and exploitation.
12. The gentrification and abuse of power by the leadership in both the academy and the political movement (Barriteau 2002; 2003d: 37–44).

The theoretical contributions of black feminism

Black feminist theorising has made critical contributions to feminist epistemology. Yet this is not reflected in anthologies of feminist thought, critiques of feminist scholarship, or even online encyclopaedic references. In a small attempt to redress the balance, I summarise some of these core contributions here.

Rejection of an undifferentiated notion of sisterhood

The first major move by black feminist scholars was to discard the simplistic, undifferentiated notion of global "sisterhood". Black feminist theory comprises a body of work by black feminist intellectuals reacting to the failure of existing feminist explanatory frameworks to adequately comprehend the realities of black women. Sojourner Truth, Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, Gloria Joseph, Toni Cade Bambara, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull, Beverley Guy-Sheftall, Paula Giddings, Michele Wallace, Stanlie James, Deborah King, Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Patricia King, Patricia

Williams, as well as many others⁵ from different disciplinary bases, interrogated existing feminist theories and found them lacking, as they myopically and wilfully ignored or denied black women's specific experiences.

For instance, Sojourner Truth's powerful statement at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 was a 19th-century deconstruction of the notion of a global, common womanhood and an insistence on inserting black womanhood in the concept of what it meant to be a woman.

Speaking of the United States in the 1970s, Audre Lorde stated, "By and large, within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretence to homogeneity of experiences covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (1984: 116). And Zillah Eisenstein reminds us of Hazel Carby's theoretical stance: "there is no lost sisterhood to be found; ... there are definite 'boundaries' to the possibilities of sisterhood" (Eisenstein, 1994: 208; Carby, 1987: 6, 19). Carby's statements contain echoes of the calls by Patricia Mohammed, Rawwida Baksh-Sooden and Neesha Haniff for a more differentiated reading of identities within Caribbean feminism (Mohammed, 1998; Baksh-Sooden, 1998; Haniff, 1996). I hold that the more comprehensive and inclusive insights offered by black feminism strengthen all feminist knowledge.

Prioritises and problematises race as a social relation, complicated by other social relations

A foundational contribution of black feminist scholarship is its exposure and problematising of race/racism as a social relation, which simultaneously complicates and is complicated by other social relations of domination. The intellectual and activist work of black feminists reveals hierarchies of power within categories of race, class, gender, patriarchal relations, sexuality and sexual orientation. Black feminism demonstrates that white or other feminist theorising that refuses or fails to recognise race as a relation of domination within feminism and society, facilitates the continued oppression of black women within the feminist movement and within society. This is a very powerful argument, and many of the dynamics of power and privilege crystallise around this.

Barbara Ransby notes that one of the strongest ideological tenets around which black feminists have organised "is the notion that race, class, gender and sexuality are co-dependent variables that cannot readily be separated and ranked in scholarship, in political practice, or lived experience" (2000: 1218).

The insertion and simultaneous theorisation of race and racism changes what constitutes feminist theory and what could be its subject matter. Radical, socialist and liberal feminists had examined other oppressive social relations, but none had made race central to their analysis. Black feminist theory exposes racism and the politics of exclusion and denial embedded in feminist knowledge production in the same way that black feminist activism confronts racism in everyday life.

Changes feminist methodologies and requires new methodological approaches

Feminist knowledge and feminist methodologies change when the specificity of the lives of black women/minority women/marginalised women inform feminist theory. Beside exposing racism and the politics of exclusion and domination, what we know and how we come to know it, what that ongoing body of knowledge looks like, and what purposes it serves, all look radically different when we recognise that other knowledge claims are less universal than they first appeared. Patricia Hill Collins insists that we understand and use black women's modes of resistance as a basis for examining the simultaneous oppressions women experience (1990). Zillah Eisenstein notes that black feminist theorist Barbara Christian is "troubled that the overtly political literature of African-American women and of the women of South America and Africa is being pre-empted by a postmodern view that assumes that 'reality does not exist' and that 'everything is relative and partial' (Eisenstein, 1994: 208; Christian, 1988: 74, 73). She goes on to state that the critiques offered by Christian and others help to clarify an important difference between a postmodern focus on diversity and the political focus offered by black feminists. She recognises that black feminists focus on difference in order to understand problems of oppression: "They struggle to theorise a feminism that is diverse at its core, rather than to theorise difference as an end in itself" (208). This distinction that Eisenstein draws out of the work of black feminist theorists is critical, and yet it is goes unrecognised in the larger body of feminist work.

Audre Lorde's open letter to white radical feminist Mary Daly (1984) demonstrates how what we think we know changes when that knowledge is approached from another vantage point. In her critique and exposure of the racism in Daly's work on the nature and functioning of the Goddess, Lorde points out that Daly images white women as Goddesses, with African women entering her analysis "only as victims and preyers-upon each other" (1984: 67).

Here Lorde exposes a key distortion that is very similar to the way that early development discourses constructed women in the Caribbean and Africa. Women in the South, whether Caribbean, Asian or African, were generally seen as helpless victims in need of international development intervention. To categorise black or any other grouping of women exclusively as victims is a persistent narrative seen all too often in discourses on women in development, minority women and abused women (Carby, 1997: 47).

A theoretical foundation shaped by women's lived experiences and subjectivity

Patricia Hill Collins states that black feminist theory needs a theoretical foundation that deals simultaneously with the experiences and effects of race, gender and class in examining and shaping the complex realities of black women's lives (1989). Black feminist theory holds that the constructed invisibility of black women's lives must be challenged. For example, much black/African-American and West Indian history has focused on the activities of black men. Feminist historians in the Caribbean such as Rhoda Reddock (1985), Lucille Mair (1986), Hilary Beckles (1989b), Verene Shepherd (1993), Bridget Brereton (1994) and Patricia Mohammed (1995) have countered this by analysing the experiences of black and Indian women in order to address women's exclusion (or token inclusion) from West Indian history.

Black feminist scholarship underlines the importance of using lived experience as a criterion for generating knowledge. These experiences should be used to validate knowledge claims, and to create or refute generalisations. This insistence that theory should be built "from the ground up" rejects Western philosophy's fascination with and faith in rationality, objectivity and theory that move from the abstract to the concrete. The epistemological and methodological shift offered by black feminism also recognises and values black women's subjectivity.

The concept of multiple jeopardies/multiple consciousness/multiple identities

Deborah King's concept of multiple jeopardies/multiple consciousness shifted the conception of women's oppressions as confined within ethnic and racial boundaries (1986). Like many other black feminists before her, King was concerned about the practical and theoretical invisibility of black women. She situates her analysis in the fluid and constantly mutating confluence of race,

class, sexism (or relations of gender) and sexuality. Barbara Smith likewise informs us that “the concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought” (1983: xxxii).

I used Deborah King’s analysis of the simultaneity of multiple oppressions to build a postmodern feminist theory for Caribbean social science research, noting that “theoretically and politically her contribution recognises that much of feminist theory represents white, Eurocentric feminist theorising and is therefore inadequate in not addressing the epistemological and practical concerns of other women, especially black women” (Barriteau, 1992: 22–23).

Deborah King and Fiona Williams maintain that the simultaneous experiences of these relations of domination not only compound these oppressions, but reconstitute them in specific ways, an important theoretical breakthrough. Barbara Ransby states:

Because any political agenda that addresses the realities of most African-American women’s lives must deal with the four major systems of oppression and exploitation – race, class, gender and sexuality – black feminist politics radically breaks down the notion of mutually exclusive, competing identities and interests and instead understands identities and political process as organic, fluid, interdependent, dynamic and historical (2000: 1219).

Yet such simultaneity of analysis is very difficult to achieve in practice. Even when there is a commitment to tracking simultaneous oppressions or relations of domination, there is tremendous political pressure to prioritise a particular oppression, to create hierarchies, to rank one as more debilitating, more devastating, more demanding of political activism than the others. All too often, the search for alternatives breaks down when confronted with the challenge of moving simultaneously on all oppressions, or recognising how the experiences of black women unite these oppressions. Even though black women exist at the intersection of all these oppressions, they are constantly asked to choose and identify with one only.

If we interrogate the powerful title of the book *All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but some of us are Brave* (Hull, Bell Scott and Smith, 1982), this can clearly be discerned. “All the Women are White” reveals that Gender = Race = Privileged Femininity. This kind of simplistic thinking, however, fails to mask the privileges available to women of the dominant race. In societies with institutionalised racism, race nuances adverse relations

of gender for women of the dominant race. In other words, for members of the dominant race, relations of race mute or mediate adverse relations of gender. For example, in the United States, relations of race carry privileges to white women individually and collectively, whether or not they want to access them. These privileges await them, are bestowed on them and are available for their use.

Likewise, “All the Blacks are Men” tracks how Race = Gender = Inferior Masculinity. The belief that all blacks are men equates race with masculinity, but with race (blackness) understood as inferior and pathological. So race in this equation brings relations of domination to masculinity in an obsessively patriarchal, capitalist society. Thus a wounded, inferior masculinity is created with expectations of the expression of that masculinity, irrespective of what individual black or minority men might contribute. And the black woman? She of course remains invisible, with no recognition of either her race or her gender. And yet society remains racist and sexist, is still driven by capitalist patriarchal racism, which means that merely to exist as a black woman requires bravery.

Simultaneously problematises public and private spheres

A major contribution of black feminist theory is that it simultaneously problematises the public and private spheres from the perspective of race. Like radical feminist theory, black feminist theory is concerned with patriarchal relations in the private domain. However, unlike radical feminism, black feminism goes on to demonstrate how racist relations follow black women into the private realm and in the process reconfigure their household and intimate spaces very differently. Experiences of relations of oppression within households differ for black or minority women in a racist state, because the remedies of the state may be applied differently. For example, these oppressive relations may be read as “cultural” as a way of side-stepping engaging with or changing them. Alternatively, domestic or intimate practices that are not understood or accepted may be viewed as pathological in an attempt to avoid acknowledging their difference. Hazel Carby informs us that black family structures in Britain have been seen “as pathological by the state and are in the process of being constructed as pathological in white feminist theory” (1997: 47). Patricia McFadden reminds us that in several African countries, archaic notions of culture are continuously invoked to curtail the advancement of women, to protect the sexual and socio-cultural privileges of men, and to deny women their property rights (2002: 18, 30–31, 34).

Analysis is located in political economy

Like socialist feminist theorising, black feminist theory deliberately adopts a framework of analysis that is situated in the political economy of state systems. Material relations and class relations are intrinsic to this analysis, which identifies how working-class black women experience antagonistic capitalist relations more intensely, as a result of the ideological relations arising from race acting upon the oppressive relations arising from gender. Once more, a very different and far more nuanced rendering emerges when the political economy of a society is examined from a black feminist theoretical perspective.

In Western political thought and within Enlightenment philosophy, the public and private realms represent radically different spheres of existence for women, in which the private world is one of dependence, while the public world is one of freedom. One result is that the private sphere becomes dependent on the public sphere, which in turn is dominated by internal and external (i.e., international) capitalist relations, thus creating hierarchies of dependence. This is why liberal feminists have argued for women's inclusion in the public realm, so that they too might enter the world of freedom, the world of liberation.⁶ However, black feminist theory reveals that both spheres represent hierarchies of dependence for black women. In a racist society, the state trivialises, misrepresents and infantilises women's citizenship and domestic concerns (Carby, 1997: 47).

Black feminist theory deconstructs patriarchal relations

Central to black feminist theorising is the knowledge that patriarchal relations structure women's lives very differently to their male peers. The "rule of the father" institutionalises men's power in the family and society. The notion that the source of this power is natural, supported by biology, and sanctioned by religion and state practices, complicates patriarchal relations for women in the family and the state. However, the crucible of racism exposes patriarchy as a construct that is neither natural, nor sanctioned by biology, nor ordained by religion, as it is clear that racism denies black men the patriarchal privileges held by white men, thus exposing the fallacy that maleness automatically confers power.

Yet this remains a powerful construct that grants domination, control and authority to men who wish to access the privileges of patriarchs. In the Commonwealth Caribbean, men of European, African and Asian/Indian descent have assumed the role of patriarchs. Black men who are minorities in racist

societies often seek control and manifest their desire to be patriarchs in ways that are pathological. Meanwhile, through their everyday experiences, black women confront the falsity of the universalising tendencies of patriarchy in a racist state. This is vital, as women who do not understand the contradictory and antagonistic interactions of patriarchal and race relations can make arguments for the reinstatement or establishment of black or other ethnic patriarchies.

Placing race at the centre alters basic concepts

By centralising women's experiences of relations of domination in race and racism, black feminist theorising radically alters the meanings and understandings of basic concepts critical to feminist analysis. Race-contesting-gender-contesting-class-contesting-race turns many concepts on their heads. In the process, black feminist theory destabilises the coherence and certainty with which certain concepts and constructs are regarded in the general body of feminist thought. I glance at several of these below.

The home

Liberal, radical, and socialist feminist theories typically analyse the home as a site of oppression for women. Betty Friedan set the stage in her 1963 analysis in *The Feminine Mystique*: "It is very urgent to understand how the very conditions of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women" (Friedan cited in Agonito, 1977: 380–81). Likewise, think of radical feminism's emphasis on patriarchal relations beginning in the family and radiating outwards to civil society, the state and the economy. In the context of a hostile, racist society, black feminism theorises the home as a respite. Note this position does not romanticise the home or deny oppressive gender relations that may be present there. However, this position recognises that for black women, the home might well be a place of physical and psychic retreat from overtly racist practices and experiences.

Black feminist theory thus reveals that there are other dimensions to black women's experiences of home that are not captured by liberal, radical, and socialist feminist analysis – especially for those black women who for centuries have been obliged to work outside the home, whether in fields, factories or the homes of others. Many of these women, instead of longing to be liberated from the home, yearn for the opportunity to go home or stay at home. In the words of two scholars, "Black feminist Barbara Smith has argued that ...

families of people of color have been havens, even if the safety or buffer they have provided has been incomplete. The invasion of the state into black family life does not negate the protective functions of the family and community” (Eisenstein, 1994: 204; Smith, 1983: 64–72).

The family

By extension, the family becomes in some instances a site of political and cultural resistance, or at least a place of respite from racism. Hazel Carby notes that ideologies of black female domesticity and motherhood have been constructed through black women’s employment in chattel positions as domestic workers and surrogate mothers to white families, rather than in relation to their own families (1997: 47).

Sexuality

Black women’s sexuality has been objectified, commodified and pathologised, with black women stereotyped as having wild and unbridled sexual urges. Alternatively, black women were presented either as unsexed or whorish – they are either Nanny or Jezebel (Stanton, 1992). Evelyn Hammond has argued that black women’s sexuality is constructed in opposition to that of white women (1993). However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that in the struggle for sexual liberation, many white women demanded reproductive technologies in order to say yes to sex, while many black women wanted autonomy and freedom from an intrusive and racist state in order to be able to say no.

Audre Lorde led the way in theorising sexuality as a source of power, exposing homophobia and heterosexism within black communities, especially towards black lesbians (1984). Patricia Hill Collins notes that for Lorde, “sexuality is a component of the larger construct of the erotic as a source of power in women. Lorde’s notion is one of power as energy, as something people possess which must be annexed in order for larger systems of oppression to function” (1990: 166). How much of Audre Lorde’s path-breaking work in theorising the range of women’s sexuality has informed work on women’s sexuality in the Caribbean?

Meanwhile, looking at the intersection of sexuality and slavery studies, Angela Davis has considered how the ending of slavery created new social and sexual realities for black women and men. She insists that it was not the economic status of former slaves that underwent radical transformation on emancipation – they were no less impoverished upon being emancipated than

they had been during slavery. Rather, it was the status of their personal and sexual relationships that was transformed or revolutionised. She argues that for the first time in the history of the African presence in the Americas, masses of black women and men were able to make autonomous decisions about their sexuality and sexual partners. Whether this was respected or not, black women and men now had sovereignty over the decision about who they could or would sleep with, and it was this that marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation (1998: 7–8).

So we see that concepts of great interest to feminist scholars, including the construction of the family, the home and sexuality noted above, are transformed in the hands of black feminist scholars.

The politics of creating feminist knowledge

Black feminist theorising presents scholars with some hard questions concerning the politics of generating knowledge, including feminist knowledge. Investigation reveals that many of the conceptual tools that “appear” (as if for the first time) in postmodern and feminist theorising of the past few decades in fact draw on the work done by black feminist scholars – but without acknowledgement of the genealogy or theoretical roots of these concepts. For example, the concept of multiple jeopardy/consciousness/identities, as well as Audre Lorde’s conceptualisation of difference,⁷ both predate their extensive and uncredited use by other scholars during the 1980s.

For instance, if we take the case of Rosemary Tong’s *Anthology of Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, we find that she somehow manages to exclude any reference to black feminist thought in the eight schools of feminist thought she covers. She does, however, recognise the work, or perhaps more accurately, the personhood of Audre Lorde, whom she individualises. In making the point that “attention to difference is precisely what will help women achieve unity” (1992: 237), she states:

Audre Lorde, whose very person is a celebration of difference – Black, lesbian, feminist, disfigured by breast cancer – and whose poetry is a voice against the duality of mind/body, wrote that as we come to know, accept, and explore our feelings, they “will become sanctuaries and fortresses and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring ideas – the house of difference so necessary to change the conceptualisation of meaningful action” (Lorde, 1985: 126). Feelings lead to ideas and ideas lead to action, said Lorde (1992: 237).

Yet Tong neither analyses nor even notes Audre Lorde's substantive earlier theorisation of the concept of difference. In what claims to be a comprehensive anthology of feminist thought, we meet Audre Lorde as an individual whose life was a celebration of difference, rather than as a scholar credited for the analytical concepts that she created, and which have been repeatedly used in feminist theorising. Tong cannot claim to be unaware of the work of black feminists as her bibliography lists several of the important works of the 1970s and 1980s, including works by Angela Davis, bell hooks, Gloria Joseph, Alice Walker and others. Her subject index makes no reference to black feminism or women of colour.

Exceptions to this kind of wilful blindness do exist; for instance, Zillah Eisenstein is a self-defined white, middle-class feminist, whose work *The Color of Gender: Reimagining Democracy* (1994: 2) presents an uncommon appreciation of what black feminist theory offers feminist epistemology, in much the same way that Jane Flax's pedagogical and research strategies do (1998).⁸ In the *Color of Gender*, Eisenstein engages fully with the collective works and contributions of black feminist theorists, offering new conceptual tools for building on this work. For example, she draws on the work of black feminist theorists to create the concept of "racialized patriarchy", stating that:

Patriarchy differentiates women from men while privileging men. Racism simultaneously differentiates people of color from whites and privileges whiteness... Like any other structuring of power, the racializing of gender is a process that always needs to be renegotiated. I use the term "racialized patriarchy" to bring attention to the continual interplay of race and gender in the structure of power (1994: 2–3).

Unfortunately, most contemporary feminist scholars continue to ignore the work of black feminists. Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia, lists six main schools of feminist thought, psychoanalytic, radical, liberal, socialist, Marxist, and postmodern. It goes on to categorise sixteen subtypes of feminism (including fat and religious feminism) without mentioning black feminism, even though the last subtype – womanism – is related (Wikipedia, 2006).

Towards a conclusion

The issues that concern Caribbean feminists – the state and women, identity politics, fractures and fissures within the women's movement (including exclusionary practices), the development of feminist consciousness, dialogues with masculinities – all resonate within black feminist theory.

In 1977, exactly 30 years ago, black feminists were addressing the question of identity politics, the claim that “the personal is political” and the need to dialogue with masculinities (all issues that Caribbean feminists are currently tackling). These issues coalesced in the statement issued by the Combahee River Collective, and explicitly called a Black Feminist Statement. This constituted a powerful theorising of the concerns confronting black women (Gloria T. Hull et al, 1982 [1977]). While expanding on the concept of identity politics (“we believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity”), the Statement ruptured the continuity between biology, being, gender roles and politics: “although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand” (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 16).

The Collective also expanded the radical feminist principle or mantra, “the personal is political”, to include the notion of the personal as also cultural:

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions for example, we have gone beyond white women’s revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women’s style of talking, testifying in Black language about what we have experienced, has a resonance that is both cultural and political (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 17).

The Collective also anticipated the construction of gender roles and recognised that like women, how men express maleness and masculinity is due to how they have been socialised, rather than the result of some essential, inherent biological maleness that makes male behaviour inevitable, fatalistic and destructive. In the process, the Collective rejects biological determinism, paving the way for a fuller understanding of the ideological and material dimensions of relations of gender:

We reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness per se, i.e., their biological maleness that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 17).

The Collective highlighted some of the conceptual flaws of radical feminist theorising (specifically lesbian separatism as a political strategy) and advocated an inclusive politic strategy that would enable black women to struggle together with black men against racism while also challenging them on sexism (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 16). They were also beginning to explore the simultaneity of multiple oppressions. What is even more compelling is that as lesbians, these women could have easily privileged their sexual orientation in their feminist politics and gender identities. Instead, they chose to politicise race and use it as a base from which to build coalitions with black men whom they did not desire sexually, but whose survival in a racist, rabidly capitalist society mattered in their analysis of capitalism, racism and sexism. Nevertheless, the revolutionary theoretical insights of this comparatively early analysis and its potential value for future feminist strategies have not been appreciated. The theoretical insights from this Statement alone could be useful for feminist coalitions and agendas in Africa and the Caribbean.

We must ask how black feminist theorising could be relevant to African women and women of the African diaspora, such as those in the Caribbean? What is its significance to white women in Northern industrialised societies? Asian women? Muslim women in the Middle East? Black feminist theorising provides many important conceptual tools for rethinking our understanding of social institutions, especially if we wish to reveal and erase relations of dominations in everyday life. I believe that African and Caribbean feminists can benefit from assessing the conceptual tools offered by the vast body of work that comprises black feminist theory, and by examining the factors surrounding its relative absence in our intellectual and activist work. This article merely scratches the surface of black feminist theory. We need ongoing investigation of this body of scholarship, as well as interrogations of its applicability. Even while recognising that the contributions of black feminist thought are confronted by the politics of knowledge production, the body of feminist knowledge is poorer for not acknowledging and disseminating the work of black feminist theorists.

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Footnotes

- 1 Black feminist scholarship is an exceedingly rich and heterogeneous body of work, spanning three centuries. This survey does not in any sense pretend to capture all the ideas, debates, theories, concepts and strategies that would comprise black feminist theorising.
- 2 I accept the Caribbean as the geographic grouping of island states and Latin American and South American countries bordering the Caribbean Sea – what has also been referred to as the Circum Caribbean. In terms of my theoretical work, I define the Caribbean as the independent Anglophone island states and British dependencies within the Caribbean Sea, including the Central American country of Belize and the South American country of Guyana. These are the former colonies of Britain, or, in a few cases, British Protectorates. They form the political grouping called the Commonwealth Caribbean (Barriteau, 2001: 3).
- 3 Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana, are the exceptions in the Commonwealth Caribbean. In these countries, especially in the post-independence period, charges and experiences of racist practices centre on relations between Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean peoples, and the contours of state policies and governance when predominantly “black” or Indian-descended parties occupy state power.
- 4 This term refers to the period after Christopher Columbus, acting on behalf of the Spanish monarchs, made landfall in the Americas in the 1490s, while searching for a trade route to the East. This is generally accepted as the beginning of European colonisation of the Americas, including the Caribbean.
- 5 This list is merely meant to be representative, suggests no hierarchies of contributions, and makes no claims to being exhaustive.
- 6 Ironically, in order to facilitate women’s participation in the public sphere, the approach of the Commonwealth Caribbean states has been to prioritise equality over freedom.
- 7 For an understanding of difference not as a polarised opposition, but a full, rich, complex location and basis from which to theorise, see Lorde’s classic essay, “The Master’s Tools will never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984).
- 8 In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jane Flax, a white, Jewish, feminist philosopher, political scientist and psychotherapist, introduced me and many other postgraduate students at Howard University to the work of black feminist theorists. In courses on political theory, feminist theory and feminist philosophy, she routinely included the scholarship of black feminists, not as part of special topics on race, but as core components of the courses she taught. I am deeply indebted to her for exposing me to this rich body of scholarship.

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A feminist review of the idea of Africa in Caribbean family studies

Theresa-Ann Rajack-Talley

Introduction

The cultures and peoples of Africa have had a profound influence within the Caribbean diaspora. This influence ranges from the peopling of the Caribbean to cultural practices encompassing religion, art, language, music, theatre and dance. The ubiquitous influence of Africa on Caribbean culture makes for an intriguing discussion of how African cultural influence is reflected in the Caribbean family literature. Do family studies models consider ethnic cultural influence, in particular traditional African culture, as an important contributory factor in the processes of Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices? More specifically, to what extent does the literature include the influence of traditional African gender practices in the analysis of women's roles in Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices?

This article is a review of the family literature that has emerged from the Anglophone Caribbean. This literature provides information helpful to a greater understanding of gender roles, gender practices, and gender relations in the Caribbean region. Caribbean families are characterised by legal marriages as well as many other forms of conjugal relationships that fall outside the legal definition of marriage.¹ Many children are born to couples who are not legally married, and there is generally an extended family system in which women play a central role in the social, cultural and economic aspects of family life. These family forms persist across periods of social and economic change and across social classes. Theoretical perspectives try to account for the emergence and persistence of these various forms and practices, the relationship between family structure and function, how family practices are related to acculturation, and how social meanings of family differ according to group experience and gender identity. A major challenge to all these various perspectives is trying to explain women's central role in the Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices that are different from some supposed European "norm".²

The objective of the review is to critically assess the influence of African culture as it appears in models of Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. The literature is examined across theoretical approaches and time periods to discern patterns in the family models discussed.³ Analysis of the literature shows three distinct patterns concerning the ways in which African cultural traditions are treated as factors shaping family and kinship practices. These patterns are related to research approaches to the Afro-Caribbean family as defined by area of focus and the type of factors that are considered. The patterns that emerge include models of the family that negate the effect of traditional African culture, those that are indifferent to the effect of traditional African culture, and those that consider traditional African cultural influences to be central to the processes of the Afro-Caribbean family. The infusion of feminist perspectives into mainstream family studies challenges some of the assumptions of models that negate or are indifferent to the influence of traditional African culture. They do this by incorporating social relations of power as part of their analyses of family and kinship practices.

The negation of African influence

Researchers identified as negating African cultural influence explicitly reject the idea that traditional African beliefs and practices play a role in Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. Structural factors such as the system of slavery and economic hardship are seen as the influences responsible for producing family and kinship practices that differ from European family norms. These family models uncritically assume that European family norms are the ideal standard for comparison of other family and kinship practices. Such acceptance of European family norms as the ideal naturally leads to negative perceptions of Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices.

The negation of African cultural influence is clearly observed in some models, while in others, it is more subtle. The negation of the role that African cultural influence plays in family and kinship practices is found in research arguing that the institution of slavery and the plantation system totally destroyed African culture, thus preventing the transfer, survival or retention of African family patterns. The formation of non-nuclear Afro-Caribbean family structures and kinship practices are purported to be the direct result of economic and cultural adaptations to the conditions of slavery (Frazier, 1966; Goveia, 1965; Matthews, 1953; Patterson, 1967; Simey, 1946). According to this position, the conditions of slavery were so brutal that most slaves were unable to maintain or practice

their traditional African culture, including their family and kinship practices. Some researchers believe that slaves were forced into patterns of “casual” or temporary relationships because the conditions of plantation life did not allow for stable conjugal unions (Goveia, 1965; Mathews, 1953). It is suggested that these “casual” relationships constituted a culture of promiscuity that has been carried over into contemporary society (Mathews, 1953).

The negation of African cultural influences in family models is more subtly reflected in the work of researchers focused on understanding family and kinship practices in more contemporary situations. African cultural influence, while not explicitly negated in the family models, is not seen as useful to incorporate in analyses of the contemporary Afro-Caribbean family (Blake, 1961; Clarke, 1957; Rodman, 1971; Rubenstein, 1980; M. G. Smith, 1957; 1962; R. T. Smith, 1956; 1967). Researchers argue that family and kinship practices must be defined by the conditions and experiences of present-day society. For example, Edith Clarke and others concerned with poverty in the post-slavery era suggest that Afro-Caribbean people of a lower social status adopted non-nuclear family structures and distinct conjugal unions and kinship practices as survival strategies for coping with oppressive social and economic marginalisation.

Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices are seen as the result of personal choice by other researchers concerned with the impact of economic marginalisation upon familial relationships (Rodman, 1971; Rubenstein, 1980). According to this perspective, family relationships result from individual responses to economic conditions. Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices are viewed as culturally appropriate responses to economic deprivation and uncertainty. For example, marginalised males elect to engage in familial relationships that do not carry the economic burdens associated with European expectations of the role of husband, father, and primary family breadwinner. Rodman (1971) reports that men of lower-status families are prevented from fulfilling the expected familial role of provider because of occupational handicaps, such as unemployment, under-employment, poorly-paid employment and unskilled employment. As a result, men engage in alternative family and kinship practices that are better suited to their social and economic circumstances.

The personal choices of lower-class individuals concerning family and kinship practices are assumed to be constrained by a desire to conform to European family norms. For instance, non-nuclear family practices such as the birth of illegitimate children and non-marital unions are not viewed as

desirable practices by the individual or the community; nonetheless, these practices are broadly accepted by the community. The gap between desired familial preferences and actual familial practices is seen as “stretching” the dominant European family norm (Rodman, 1971; Rubenstein, 1980). Such “stretching” of the dominant European family norms by individuals provides more flexible and economically viable family and kinship practices that are socially acceptable to the community (Rubenstein, 1980).

The family models of Blake (1961) and Clarke (1957), as well as Rodman (1971) and Rubenstein (1980), link Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices to group and individual responses to limited social and economic opportunities. The influences of traditional African family cultural beliefs, values and practices are excluded from these family models. The models identify European family norms as the norm and most functional for individuals, groups and societies. Patterns of Afro-Caribbean family structures, conjugal unions and kinship practices are compared with European family practices and viewed as functional adaptations by marginalised individuals, families, and groups, but dysfunctional for the society. Thus, assumptions of the inherent superiority of European family norms are implicit in these models.

Other researchers link Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices to the nature of a socially stratified plural society (M. G. Smith, 1957; 1965; 1962; R. T. Smith, 1956; 1967; 1988).⁴ M. G. Smith argues that in the plural society, different sub-cultural groups are relatively separated. These sub-cultural groups each have distinct norms, values and social arrangements, and without a dominant set of norms, society is relatively chaotic and unstable (1956). The cultural norms of sub-cultural groups may become associated with colour or ethnicity because of the hierarchy of political dominance. In particular, non-nuclear family and kinship practices are considered characteristic of lower-class Afro-Caribbean sub-cultures, and are indicative of the lack of acculturation to European family norms (M. G. Smith, 1965). The politically dominant segment of society is acculturated to European norms, and social mobility is associated with acculturation.

On the other hand, R. T. Smith (1956; 1967; 1988) views family and kinship practices in relation to the hierarchical organisation of society. In the plural society, social economic segments are differentiated by class and colour and may have a unique set of cultural practices relative to family and kinship practices. However, European family norms are practiced to a greater degree by the middle and upper classes, but are seen as desirable norms by all social

status groups. Thus the non-nuclear family and kinship practices of the lower classes are linked to the degree of assimilation. For example, female-headed Afro-Caribbean households are seen as a stage in the assimilation process in which males are economically marginalised. The presence of family and kinship practices that are similar to traditional African cultures are not linked to African cultural influences, but to social class experiences in the plural society. In this context, R. T. Smith views traditional African culture as unimportant to analyses of family and kinship practices (1967; 1988).

The assumption common to the work of M. G. Smith and R. T. Smith is that contemporary social institutions, such as family and kinship networks, cannot be the result of cultural and historical factors. However, European family norms, in one way or another, are important in the assimilation process and play a major role in family and kinship practices. These researchers therefore exclude the influence of traditional African culture in their analysis of the family, but include the influence of European culture. Moreover, the uncritical acceptance of European family norms as the ideal suggests a cultural bias that can result in negative value orientation towards non-European family and kinship practices.

Indifference to African cultural influence

The researchers whose family models are identified as being indifferent to African cultural influences adopt the perspective that traditional African culture contributed to the development of societal norms, but no longer has a direct influence on contemporary family and kinship practices. This perspective assumes a set of shared family norms that are part of a dominant Caribbean creole culture.⁵ These shared norms are believed to have emerged from a blending of various traditional ethnic cultures, primarily African and European, as well as the common experience of slavery and colonisation. Douglas (1992) suggests that non-nuclear forms of Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices persist in contemporary society and across social classes because they are part of a set of shared cultural norms unique to the Caribbean. Implicit in the family models of these researchers is the historical role of African culture in the establishment of Caribbean social norms, particularly family and kinship practices. The family models of these researchers do not make comparisons to European family norms, either as a desired ideal or point of reference.

Researchers believe that individuals and groups have different living experiences because of class, gender and colour distinctions in creole societies

(Alexander, 1977; 1984; Douglass, 1992; Manyoni, 1977; 1980). Accordingly, while there are a set of shared family norms in the creole society, family and kinship relationships will be practiced differently by the various social classes. Differences in familial practices according to social class are seen as a matter of degree, and result from differences in social meanings that are ascribed to family and kinship practices. The assumption underlying these family models is that the set of creolised norms are the desired norms of the upper and middle classes. Alexander (1984), for example, reported that while illegitimate children and non-legal conjugal unions are practised by middle- and lower-class Jamaican families, society associates these familial relationships with black lower-class behaviour. Similarly, in Barbados, having illegitimate children was viewed as part of normal life by lower-class women, but for middle-class women, having children through marriage was considered more desirable (Manyoni, 1977).

These family models also highlight the importance of colour in the stratification system, where dark skin is associated with the lower classes (Alexander, 1977; 1984). Colour and class interactions are believed to have an effect on family and kinship practices. Alexander for example, argues that non-nuclear family and kinship practices are viewed as undesirable, and although found in all social classes, are the expected behaviour of the black lower social status groups, particularly black men (1977). Societal beliefs hold that black lower-class males engage in irresponsible sexual behaviour and do not make good partners or fathers. The negative value orientation associated with black is sometimes compensated for by class status, in particular, in the selection of mates for marriage and/or parenting. Educated black women and women of colour, for example, prefer to have children within marriage, and middle-class women with illegitimate children marry men with good occupations. In some instances, a person of a darker skin tone would be considered a good partner and spouse if he or she was of a similar or higher social status (Alexander, 1977; 1984).

African cultural influence on family and kinship practices is included in family models of the creole society to the extent that these influences are assumed to have played a role in producing a set of indigenous shared family norms and practices. The models, however, are indifferent to the role of traditional African culture in shaping and giving meaning to contemporary familial forms and practices. Patterns of family and kinship practices are linked instead to social class, colour and gender experiences.

The inclusion of African cultural influence

Nevertheless, a review of Caribbean family literature shows a concerted and persistent attempt to include African cultural influences in family models across theoretical perspectives. This interest has been central to research seeking to explain the existence and persistence of non-European forms of family and kinship practices, gender roles and gender identities across social classes and periods of economic change.

There are two very different thrusts in the literature on the influence of traditional African culture in Afro-Caribbean family models. One approach views slave families as the product of African traditional family practices that survived the harsh conditions of slavery and plantation life. This approach emphasises the centrality of historical cultural influences on the family. A second approach includes the influence of traditional African culture as an ideological factor in family models of both slave and contemporary Afro-Caribbean families. Emphasis is placed on human beings as active agents who negotiate their social realities based on past and present experiences and understandings. What these approaches have in common is the use of historical and contemporary social and structural factors in understanding the Afro-Caribbean family.

The explicit inclusion of African culture as a factor in understanding Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices is illustrated in literature concerned with the origins of slave family and kinship practices. Researchers believe that Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices arose, in part, because of the retention and/or re-interpretation of African traditions and practices (Craton, 1979; Herskovits, 1958; Higman, 1973; 1974; 1978; Mintz and Price, 1976). Melville Herskovits, for example, argues that slave family structures and kinship practices are founded on the fundamental principles of African kinship systems, as well as the harsh conditions of slavery. Slavery and the plantation system could not totally suppress traditional African cultural patterns, and some African family traditions survived (1958).

Other researchers argue that slavery did not hold such absolute power and domination that slaves could not fashion their own way of life, including rebuilding family and kinship structures (Craton, 1979; Higman, 1973; 1974; 1978; Mintz and Price, 1976). The assumption of these researchers is that the beliefs, customs and practices brought by Africans cannot simply be erased from memory and will eventually reappear in some form. For example, Mintz and Price (1976) argue that slavery made it difficult for Africans to maintain specific African familial structures, but African slaves nevertheless drew on their traditional African family norms to form new familial relations.

The notion that slavery totally disrupted traditional family ties and practices is also refuted by researchers who have examined plantation documents and slave records. Findings of both nuclear and extended families among slaves led researchers to suspect that both European family norms and traditional African family norms contributed to slave family and kinship practices. Plantation records show that the nuclear family was the common among slaves, but that there were significant numbers of female-headed slave households. These researchers also found that there were strong family bonds in the extended family and kinship networks of slaves (Craton, 1979; Higman, 1973). Moreover, Craton (1979) suggests that the strong family bonds, the extended family relationships, and the kinship ties developed into networks of cohesive villages similar to village life in Africa.

These models of slave families view traditional African family culture as one of the elements that explain Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. They also suggest that the impact of traditional African family influences was more evident in the kinship practices of slaves than in slave family structures. These models do not include implicit or explicit comparisons to “ideal” European family norms, as both nuclear and non-nuclear slave family and kinship practices are seen as legitimate family forms.

A second approach also includes the influence of traditional African cultural values in family models of both slave and contemporary families. This approach emerges in the gender-centred family literature within a feminist theoretical framework. The family models of this approach view traditional African culture as having an influence on the gender ideologies of the Caribbean. These gender ideologies are used by Afro-Caribbean women and men to negotiate their social positions in the domestic and public realms of their lives (Barriteau, 1998; Rajack-Talley, 2004; Reddock, 1985; 1998; Mohammed, 1998; Momsen, 1998; 2002).⁶ Accordingly, gender roles and gender identities in the family, in conjugal unions and in kinship practices are negotiated entities within specific ideological, social and economic parameters.

The link between ideology, gender roles and gender identities is found in family models that focus on both the slave family and contemporary familial relationships. Some researchers focus on the role of women-centred ideology and slave women's resistance to race, class and gender domination in the home and workplace (Besson, 1998; Massiah, 1982; Mohammed, 1998; Momsen, 1993; 1998; 2002; Morrissey, 1998; Rajack-Talley, 2004; Reddock, 1998). Other researchers examine the links between male-centred ideologies,

perceptions about masculinity and men's role in the family (Barrow, 1997, 1998; Black, 1995; Branche, 1997; Chevannes, 1993). A common thread seen in the work of these researchers is a focus on the intersection of ideology, human agency and structural economic factors.

Researchers who investigate slave women's resistance to race, class and gender domination argue that enslaved African women drew on their traditional gender ideologies and practices to negotiate the conditions of slavery and family life (Momsen, 1993; 1988; 2002; Morrissey, 1998; Rajack-Talley, 2004; Reddock, 1998). In particular, traditional matrifocal and matrilineal⁷ beliefs and practices that promote female autonomy and independence were important in framing women-centred ideologies (Mair, 1975; Mathurin-Mair, 2000; Massiah, 1982). Slave women used these ideologies to negotiate their roles as workers, mothers and heads of households. For example, the conditions of plantation life were such that women were treated as individual workers, and were economically independent of a male partner in the household and family. In addition, women became household heads as men were often separated from women and children under conditions of slavery. Researchers believe that slave women drew on matrifocal-oriented gender ideologies in order to be effective in their economic and social roles central to female-headed households and extended family networks (Massiah, 1984; Momsen, 1988; 2002; Morrissey, 1998; Rajack-Talley, 2004; Reddock, 1995). These roles are exemplified by grandmothers and great-grandmothers who became powerful and respected individuals in the family and slave communities. According to Beckles (1989), these matriarchs took up the responsibility of maintaining strong family bonds and kinship ties, as well as raising the social status of their children, grandchildren and other members of the extended family.

Afro-Caribbean women in contemporary society also draw on women-centred ideologies to negotiate their positions in society and within the household (Mohammed, 1998; Momsen, 1998; Rajack-Talley, 2004; Reddock, 1998). The influence of these ideologies was important because the economic environment in the period following slavery placed great economic and social burdens on Afro-Caribbean women. For instance, the economic decline of the plantation system in Caribbean societies resulted in the mass migration of men in search of work. As a result, women had to assume the role of major breadwinner in female-headed households (Momsen, 1998; Reddock, 1995; Shepherd, 1999). Many women linked to the land and became peasant farmers or plantation labourers, while others migrated into towns to work as domestics,

seamstresses, washers, street vendors and petty traders (Shepherd, 1999). Women used women-centred ideologies to help negotiate these conditions and effectively play the roles of single parent and sole provider in their households and families.

Male-centred ideologies are also believed to be influential for Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. In particular, researchers view perceptions of masculinity and sexuality, and the male role within the family and kinship networks, as emerging from male-centred ideologies indigenous to the Caribbean (Barrow, 1997; 1998; Black, 1995; Branche, 1997; Chevannes, 1993). These male-centred ideologies are linked to African cultural influences, including traditional male roles and practices in the family. Polygamy in the Caribbean, in particular, has been identified as having its origins in Africa (Beckles, 1989). Others are more sceptical of the direct link between Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices and traditional African beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, they recognise the similarities and the possibility that traditional African culture has some influence on the Afro-Caribbean family (Craton, 1978; Higman, 1976).

Researchers have found that within the male-centred ideologies, male perceptions of masculinity and sexuality are linked to men's sexual prowess and status in the family and society (Barrow, 1997; Branche, 1997; Chevannes, 1993). Status is drawn from the fulfilment of the male role in family and kin networks. Fatherhood, for example, is most commonly associated with ceremonial events and child maintenance (Black, 1995). This, of course, is dependent upon the abilities of the male to be a financial provider. In Jamaica, men will get married if they feel that they are economically secure, but they also perceive common-law unions and visiting relationships as normal familial relationships. Non-legal conjugal forms are not seen by men as constituting casual sexual relations (Chevannes, 1993). Similarly, Branche (1997) reports that teenage boys define male roles and responsibilities according to their perceptions of masculinity and the economic stability of men. They believe that economic circumstances can prevent men from considering marriage and engaging in stable sexual relationships. Thus, serial conjugal relationships are viewed as economically appropriate, as well as an expression of masculine sexual prowess.

These findings led researchers to conclude that although Caribbean males view marriage as a sacred institution, they also engage in conjugal unions that are acceptable to society and appropriate to their economic situations.

The non-legal conjugal unions offer sexual freedom, have limited economic responsibilities, and are linked to expressions of masculinity (Barrow 1997; 1998; Branche, 1997; Chevannes, 1993).

From a gender perspective, both women-centred and male-centred gender ideologies are viewed as factors influencing Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. The family models of these researchers include the influence of traditional African culture as a key contributor in the development of Caribbean gender ideologies. These gender ideologies help men and women define their roles and identities in family and kinship relations within specific social and economic conditions. The models thus assume that human agency is the link between social structure, culture and social meaning. Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices are not compared with idealised European family norms. Moreover, these models take into consideration the specific historical, political and economic contexts in which individuals and groups ascribe meaning to and define family and kinship practices.

Conclusions

This review of family literature illustrates the wide variation of research foci and theoretical perspectives used in family studies in the Caribbean. The literature was examined in terms of orientation toward the influence of traditional African culture on Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. The study found that all the orientations considered the influence of traditional African culture, but in different ways. Analysis of these orientations accentuates the influence of ethnocentric bias on comparative normative standards and the conceptual models of the Afro-Caribbean family. The analysis reveals that ethnocentric bias affects the models and assumptions of researchers who negate the influence of traditional African culture. The models that are indifferent towards or inclusive of the influence of traditional African culture implicitly reject a Eurocentric approach. In particular, the feminist approach is critical of the Eurocentric and male biases that dominate the literature; instead, it incorporates both historical and contemporary social forces into the understanding of family and kinship practices.

The analysis of the literature shows that all theoretical perspectives, in some ways, address the issue of traditional African cultural influences on family and kinship practices. Some researchers negate the influence of traditional African culture, but must nevertheless engage in a debate as to why traditional African culture is not a factor in family and kinship practices. Other researchers work from the assumption that traditional African culture was once of historical

significance to the development of creolised Caribbean family norms, but is no longer a factor influencing contemporary Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. Finally, perspectives that include the influence of traditional African cultures present arguments about the historical and contemporary significance of this influence on Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. Traditional African family and kinship practices are assumed to have survived in the form of various gender ideologies, and continue to be reflected in Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices.

Ethnocentric bias was found to dominate many of the earlier studies on Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices. This bias is demonstrated by the adoption and uncritical use of European norms as the standard. The ethnocentric bias implicit in these perspectives invariably compares slave or Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices with those of a mythical European norm. In some instances, slave and Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices are interpreted as promiscuous, unstable and deviant. In other cases, they are interpreted as functional for the individual or group, but dysfunctional for larger society. In both instances, it is assumed that that individuals and groups will achieve upward social mobility only through the adoption of European family norms.

Perspectives that argue that traditional African culture had and continues to have an effect on slave and Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices reject ethnocentric bias. These perspectives adopt the position that slave and Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices could have both European and African cultural influences. There is no comparison to dominant European norms, and Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices are viewed as being culturally distinct. The absence of ethnocentric bias allows the researchers to focus on positive aspects, such as stable family and kinship networks, as well as the central economic and social roles of women in slave and contemporary Afro-Caribbean families.

This assessment of the Caribbean family literature reveals the critical role of the feminist perspectives in Afro-Caribbean family studies. These feminist perspectives are the most critical of ethnocentric and male-oriented biases, and respond by suggesting new research foci and methodologies for understanding the Afro-Caribbean family. The social relations of family and kinship patterns are viewed within social, economic and political contexts. As a result, gender ideologies and the role of human agency are given central importance to the processes involved in family and kinship practices. Family and conjugal unions

are treated as arenas of social conflict in which gender roles, gender identities and familial relationships are negotiated. This approach was found to be the most successful in guiding explanations about the existence, persistence and social meanings of Afro-Caribbean family and kinship practices.

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Footnotes

- 1 Among these forms are common-law unions, consisting of a man and woman living together as husband and wife, but who are not legally married. Visiting relationships occur where a man and woman have a stable conjugal union, but are not legally married or co-habituating. In these relationships, there may be children by both partners. In some Caribbean societies, common-law relationships are recognised by the laws of that country, and in most Caribbean societies, common-law unions are socially accepted. The same recognition and consideration is not given to visiting relationships.
- 2 There is an ongoing debate on the social construction of a universal family model defined as nuclear, the married conjugal pair with children living in the same household held up as an ideal model. Moreover, there is also much disagreement on whether this family model is essentially European. In the Caribbean, the concept of the nuclear family as the ideal and European is debated within the context of varying degrees of ethnocentric bias in defining the family.
- 3 This literature is comprised of different theoretical approaches and research objectives that sometimes overlap around common themes. Caribbean family literature has generally been organised according to theoretical approaches and/or chronological order (see Barrow, 1996) and value orientation (see Rajack-Talley and Talley, 2005).
- 4 The plural society is viewed differently by these researchers. See M. G. Smith (1965) on the plural society in the British West Indies and R. T. Smith (1967) on social stratification, cultural pluralism and integration in West Indian societies.
- 5 E. Brathwaite (1971) provides a detailed discussion that explains the development of a creole society in Jamaica. M. G. Smith and R. T. Smith also debate the creole society within a plural society context.
- 6 The gender ideology indigenous to the Caribbean is built upon the historical experiences of the women and men who came to the region as slaves or indentured servants, as well as the influences of the gender ideologies of their original birthplaces (Mohammed, 1998; Momsen, 1993; 2002; Rajack-Talley, 2004). This experience includes a disruption of traditional gender systems during slavery and the post-emancipation periods, and the imposition of European

patriarchy alongside inherited gender ideologies in every aspect of social life, including religion and family life and structures (Rajack-Talley, 2004).

- 7 Matrifocal refers to the central role of women in everyday life, whereas matrilineal refers to the practice of determining one's ancestry through the maternal line.

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Racial and gender inequality in Latin America: Afro-descendent women respond¹



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In Latin American and the Caribbean, colonial states subdued large indigenous populations and imported slave labour from Africa, resulting in multi-ethnic and multi-racial societies. After independence, Latin American states traditionally feared racial and ethnic divisions that hampered their quest for identity and nationhood. Rather than excluding these subaltern populations, as in the US (where non-white populations were much smaller), they were to be assimilated by a process of *mestizaje* or “race mixture”, which was seen as both biological and cultural. White immigration was stimulated, along with the teaching of Spanish or Portuguese as the dominant (and often only) language, and conversion to Catholicism. The drive to assimilate racially or ethnically distinct populations in order to forge a unified and homogeneous image persists today in the region. This helps explain the reluctance on the part of Latin American states to recognise race or ethnic discrimination (Safa, 1998). Hence the importance of the 2000 Santiago declaration,² in which Latin American states explicitly recognised Afro-descendent populations as victims of racism who had been denied rights to equal participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their nations (Cimarronas, 2001; Turner, 2002).

Santiago and the build-up to the Third UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances, held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001, engendered considerable activity in the Latin American and Caribbean region, particularly in Brazil. Afro-descendents had remained somewhat invisible in many Latin American countries, dominated by a *mestizo* hegemony (as in Mexico or Peru), or regarded as largely white (as in Argentina or Costa Rica). Indigenous populations had organised earlier and received considerable international support, especially in their quest for land. But in contrast to the indigenous communities, Afro-descendents were less differentiated from the general population, and less recognised as having

a distinctive culture. Many features of Afro-descendent culture, such as their speech or the high percentage of female-headed households, were seen simply as deviations from European norms.

The invisibility of racial differences in Latin American and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is facilitated by the fluid nature of racial classification in the region. Racial categories are socially constructed and based largely on social status and phenotype, where factors such as skin colour, hair and facial features figure prominently. Although indigenous and Afro-descendent populations in Latin America and the Caribbean have both been portrayed as inferior, biologically as well as culturally, and are found principally in the lower socio-economic strata, individuals could modify their racial category through *blanqueamiento* or whitening. *Blanqueamiento* in Latin America is achieved primarily through upward mobility and intermarriage with whites, who enjoy the highest racial status. This bias toward whiteness is a major component of *mestizaje* that Afro-descendent groups have attempted to combat, because it continued to demean their own culture and physical features. Their adoption of the term Afro-descendent to cover all non-white persons eliminates the invidious distinction between blacks and “mulattoes” (persons of mixed race), whereby the latter were considered closer to the white norm. Although the term “Afro-descendent” has its critics (as will be discussed later), it will be used in this paper interchangeably with “black” and other terms such as “Afro-Latinos”.

This article addresses the efforts of Afro-descendent solidarity groups to combat *blanqueamiento*, focusing on three areas: 1) developing racial consciousness to overcome the feelings of inferiority induced by slavery and *blanqueamiento*; 2) promoting the well-being and upward mobility of the Afro-descendent population, which often suffers from social exclusion in employment, housing and public services such as health and education; and 3) pressuring the state to address these grievances and give the Afro-descendent population greater cultural recognition.

My article focuses on the social mobilisation of Afro-descendent women in Latin America and the Caribbean, a topic which has received little attention in the literature thus far. It is likely that a gender perspective will gain prominence in the literature on social exclusion as Afro-descendent women become organised and make their voices heard. The increasing public presence of Afro-descendent women in the region has been influenced by the growth of the feminist movement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the emergence of black women professionals and their organisations into NGOs. Afro-descendent

women accuse the mainstream feminist movement of neglecting their concerns and, like the state, adopting a culturally homogenous view of women that fails to do justice to their cause. Afro-descendent women have also had to negotiate a place within the larger black movement, traditionally led by men.

Afro-descendent women are clearly not the only contemporary group to challenge the state in Latin America, as the social movements led by indigenous, women and human rights advocates demonstrate (see Safa, 2005). Neo-liberal policies designed to minimise the reach of the state in the name of free trade and a market economy contributed in the 1980s and 1990s to increasing inequality and poverty in the region. Growing inequality increased the urgency of Afro-descendent and indigenous groups to legitimate their claims to resources from the state and to recognition of their cultural autonomy.

Afro-descendent women's organisations are now found in virtually every country in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, but this article cannot cover them all. Instead, I shall focus on Brazil, where the movement is most advanced, and on the Atlantic coast of Central America, where people of African descent are in a clear minority in *mestizo*³ societies. Statistical data by race and gender is still lacking in all areas, even in Brazil, which is the best documented. This lack of data is also a reflection of the state's unwillingness to deal with black people and their problems, which remain largely invisible. Nevertheless, Afro-descendent groups are beginning to challenge the old *mestizaje* paradigm based on *blanqueamiento* or whitening, as will become apparent in the following analysis.

Development of racial and gender consciousness

The viability of Afro-descendent women's NGOs varies widely in the region, as does their degree of gender consciousness. But even the most fragile Afro-descendent women's NGO focuses on dignity and cultural identity, often manifest in an interest in Afro-descendent histories, cultures and languages long ignored in their countries, both on the popular and the academic levels. This focus on racial consciousness is what distinguishes black women's NGOs from the mainstream white and *mestizo* organisations. The recognition of black identity is often phrased in terms of human rights, which is now understood, particularly by feminists, to encompass not only equality under the law, but the right to be different, and to have this difference recognised socially (Jelin, 1996: 178–9). In the hands of black feminists, such a conception of human rights takes on added racial significance.

Development of racial consciousness has long been a goal of the Afro-Brazilian movement, which dates back to the 1930s. However, despite the proliferation of Afro-Brazilian organisations and their emphasis on black pride, they have not yet achieved mass support among the Afro-descendent population, which increasingly is socially differentiated (Hasenbalg and Silva, 1999). Black consciousness is also in opposition to dominant Brazilian values of harmony and lack of racial confrontation, while black movements are manipulated by the state as a means of containing potential collective political protest. For example, the Brazilian state's promotion of black cultural representation does not necessarily translate into political mobilisation (Hanchard, 1994). As Wade (1993) and others have shown, there is a fear among Afro-descendents that to separate themselves out as a group may imply lack of allegiance to the nation, to which most are fiercely loyal. Thus, nationalism takes precedence over racial consciousness (Walker, 2002).

The very definition of who is black is a problem, and has led to severe undercounts, as in the Costa Rican census of 2000, and the Colombian census of 1993. Part of the undercount is due to Afro-descendents' reluctance to identify themselves as black because of the negative stereotypes long associated with blackness. The "mulatto escape hatch", as Degler termed it (1971), helped lighter-skinned Afro-descendents escape some of the oppression associated with being black, by convincing white society that they were more like whites than blacks. In Brazil, since 1940, there has been a noticeable move in the national census away from the black to the mulatto or *pardo* category (Lovell and Wood, 1998). However, Lovell and Wood have shown that nationwide, blacks and mulattoes face similar disadvantages (compared to whites) on critical issues such as life expectancy, school enrolment, and occupational distribution. Nevertheless, upwardly mobile blacks may reclassify themselves from darker- to lighter-skinned racial categories on the basis of their social class. This is one reason why almost all Afro-descendent organisations, both those of mixed genders and those with women-only memberships, have focused on raising black consciousness and propagating black culture (Morrison, 2002: 19).

The need for a uniform standard and generic term has recently led to the adoption of the term "Afro-descendent", coined by Brazilian leaders of the black movement, which would signify a change of emphasis from phenotype to descent in the Latin American definition of race. The compound word "Afro-descendent" also focuses on the African heritage among the great majority of blacks who are racially mixed, and thus avoids the whitening bias inherent in

earlier notions of *mestizaje*. However, the term also has its critics, because it brings Latin American racial constructs closer to those of the US, by adopting a bipolar dichotomy between Afro-descendants and whites, which many Latin American activists strongly reject. Despite the need for greater black solidarity, most Latin American activists fear the racial oppositions existing in the US. Although adopted by some academics outside of Brazil, the term Afro-descendant is still sparsely used in popular discourse.

The competition Afro-descendant NGOs face for funding and government support from other groups, including the women's movement and indigenous NGOs, helps explain why black NGOs feel they need to maintain a solid front in dealing with the state and donor organisations. It is clear there are tensions between indigenous groups and Afro-descendants, particularly in Colombia and in ethnically charged areas like the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast. This is aggravated when, as in these cases, the two groups have disputing claims to land and other resources. But government actions have also served to reinforce these tensions, as the failure to fully implement Law 70 in Colombia and the Autonomy Law in Nicaragua show.⁴ The indigenous movement, which is older, better organised, and better funded internationally, is often given priority.⁵

Given their precarious base, some of the male-led Afro-descendant NGOs have also been hostile to the formation of separate women's organisations. Many of the leaders of the existing black women's NGOs started out in gender-mixed organisations. In order to understand the experience Afro-descendant women have had in working within the wider black movement and within the feminist movement, the Inter-American Development Bank (for whom this research was originally conducted) distributed questionnaires to a select group of black women's NGOs with whom they worked. Afro-descendant women in Colombia and Central America spoke most clearly about opposition from men within the wider black movement. They still seem to be reluctant to challenge men on ethnic issues, which speaks to the vulnerability of the black movement in both regions. The relationship between consciousness of inequality by gender, and by race and ethnicity, still needs to be explored, as it is a problem in indigenous communities as well.

Among the Garifuna of Honduras, there is clear rivalry and tension between the two major organisations, OFRANEH, a grassroots support organisation led by women, and ODECO, a non-governmental organisation led by a man, but largely staffed by women and serving a largely female constituency. As Eva Thorne (2004) demonstrates, both have been actively pressuring the Honduran

government to recognise the land rights of the Garifuna population along the Atlantic coast, which is now under threat from tourism development and *mestizo* colonisation. By 2001, 39 collective titles to land had been granted, totaling 32 000 hectares, but this land is limited to the residential centres, and does not include the agricultural land and fishing rights on which the Garifuna traditionally depended for a livelihood. In 2004 a new law was passed, allowing foreigners to buy Honduran coastal land, which further threatens Garifuna land. ODECO advocates a developmentalist approach working within the Honduran state, while OFRANEH is more separatist and focuses on indigenous identity. OFRANEH feels development will destroy Garifuna culture (Brondo, n.d.). When our research team met with ODECO staff and visited their community projects, there was no mention of OFRANEH.

The split within the Garifuna community in Honduras, and their distance from other Afro-descendent groups such as the Afro-Creoles with whom they share much of the Atlantic coast, has seriously weakened Afro-descendent solidarity in Central America. In 1995, they formed a joint organisation, called CABO (Central American Black Organisation), but their mutual disdain is evident. The Garifuna claim to have “autochthonous” status, based on their arrival in Honduras before the formation of the Honduran state (England, 1999). They also claim never to have assimilated into European culture, and to be the only Afro-descendent group to retain their language (which is dying out as a result of pressure from the Honduran state to teach only Spanish in schools, and also because of migration). In contrast, the Afro-Creoles pride themselves on their British heritage, which they brought with them from Jamaica and other West Indian islands. As Protestants and English speakers brought to Central America to build a railroad and work on banana plantations (Gordon, 1998), they gained a higher status than the Garifuna, whom they treated with disrespect. Afro-Creoles are urbanised and wage-earning, with much higher levels of education, especially among women. But like the Garifuna, their ethnic standing has diminished with mass male migration to the US, and today the remaining populations are largely dependent on remittances, sent principally from the US.

England (1999) argues that what is emerging among the Garifuna is a new ethnic identity as a Garifuna nation, tied by common language, culture and history, but not bound by any territorial state. Both Garifuna and Afro-Creoles have settled in New York City and to a lesser extent Miami and other coastal cities, reflecting their expertise as seamen, which opened opportunities

to emigrate (on cruise ships, and so on). But to press their land claims, the Garifuna must continue to legitimate their status as an autochthonous people tied to territorially bounded communities. Outside of this space, as England (1999) shows, their “authenticity and often the rights that go with it become questioned”.

Participation in the wider women’s movement undoubtedly contributed to raising the gender consciousness of Afro-descendent women. However, most of the black women’s NGOs we met with are very critical of the wider women’s movement, because of its racial and class biases. As in the US, black women had difficulty convincing white middle-class feminists that their demands might be different (Caldwell, 2001). Feminists in Latin American and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean were reluctant to acknowledge diversity because of the need to maintain a united front to counter fierce male opposition. But constant pressure from Afro-descendent feminists, who came armed with data demonstrating racial as well as gender exclusion, convinced many feminist organisations to change and to help make visible the critical situation of black women, especially in Brazil. By the time of the Durban conference in 2001, two major national feminist networks – the *Articulacao de Mulheres Brasileiras* (AMB) (Alliance of Brazilian Women) and the *Rede Nacional Femenista da Saúde, Direitos Reprodutivos e Sexuais* (National Feminist Network for Health, Reproductive Rights and Sexuality) – had assumed a racial perspective on gender and published demographic data on Afro-descendent women for the conference (Lebon, 2006). One was a general report on Afro-descendent women published by the AMB entitled *Mulheres Negras: Um retrato da discriminacao racial no Brasil* (*Black Women: A Portrait of Racial Discrimination in Brazil*) and the other a special issue of the *Jornal da Rede* or *Women’s Health Network* (March 2001) dedicated entirely to black women’s health issues. Fatima Oliveira, a doctor who was elected Executive Secretary of the Women’s Health Network in 2003, maintains the special issue was the only document on the health of the black population distributed in Durban (2003: 65).

Promoting the welfare and social mobility of the Afro-descendent population

Afro-descendent women have taken a leadership position in the struggle for cultural autonomy, just as they have long stood at the forefront of material survival. In most Latin American and Caribbean countries, Afro-descendent

women have a high labour force participation rate that is partly the result of the high percentage of female heads of household. I have argued elsewhere that Afro-descendent women do not share in the myth of the male breadwinner, which persuaded many white and *mestiza* women to rely on their husbands as economic providers (Safa, 1995). The racial and class barriers faced by most Afro-descendent men reduce their capacity to be adequate breadwinners, and this is aggravated by decades of large-scale male emigration, particularly in areas like the Afro-Creole and Garifuna communities. At the same time, many Afro-descendent women have succeeded in significantly raising their educational levels, particularly in Brazil and to some extent in Colombia, while the Afro-Creole women in Nicaragua and Costa Rica have long enjoyed higher educational status than their neighbours on the Atlantic coast. Only Garifuna women are still plagued by low levels of schooling and poor access to jobs, and also maintain higher fertility levels than their Afro-descendent sisters. The degree to which these factors help explain the level of gender and racial consciousness in these distinct Afro-descendent populations remains to be explored.

Considerable gains in promoting gender equality have been achieved in countries such as Costa Rica and Brazil, where the women's movement is strong. In fact, it would appear that in Brazil, gender inequality has been more comprehensively addressed than racial inequality. Overall gender gaps in years of schooling and illiteracy have been done away with, but the educational differential between blacks and whites has remained virtually unchanged since the 1920s (Henriques, 2001). This raises the issue of the degree to which the achievements of the women's movement in terms of education, jobs and political power have been limited largely to white or *mestiza* women. Once more, it is not certain to what extent we are dealing with a racial or/and class issue, where these benefits have gone largely to white or *mestiza* middle- and upper-class women, and have not reached the poor, many of whom are black (see Guimaraes, 2000: 51; Lovell, 1999).

The decades from 1960 to 2000 saw impressive educational gains for all in Brazil, especially in São Paulo, the industrial centre, and especially after the return to democratic rule in the late 1970s. In an interesting intersectional analysis of São Paulo census data⁶ over this 40-year period, Lovell (2006) shows that working women of both races consistently achieve higher levels of education than men, but Afro-Brazilian women continue to lag behind white women:

By 2000, only 6 per cent of employed Afro-Brazilian women and 4 per cent of employed Afro-Brazilian men had completed 12 or more years of schooling, compared to 23 per cent and 18 per cent respectively for employed white women and men (Lovell, 2006: 69).

Increased educational levels contributed to gains in the clerical and service sector among both Afro-Brazilian and white women, but by 2000, one in three Afro-Brazilian women continued to work as domestic servants, and were much less likely than white women to be employed in the highest paying administrative and professional occupations (Lovell, 2006: 73). Nevertheless, occupational segregation is stronger by sex than by race, with the better-paid jobs in manufacturing and administration going predominantly to men of both races (Lovell, 2006: 75).

Wage inequality is even greater. In 2000, women workers throughout Brazil earned only 64 per cent of men's wages (Lovell, 2006: 75). In São Paulo, the gender wage gap is narrowing, especially among Afro-Brazilians, but the racial wage gap has remained constant, primarily because of educational and occupational differences (Lovell, 2006: 75). However, the gender and racial wage gaps increase with higher educational and occupational levels, showing that better schooling and jobs cannot eliminate these gaps.

Lovell concludes that despite major changes in Brazil's socioeconomic base since 1960, workplace discrimination is increasing. Educational and occupational differences do explain some of the racial wage gap among men, but less so among women. Employers discriminate against women of both races, and in view of their higher educational qualifications, white women are the most discriminated against of all groups (Lovell, 2006: 82). Yet Afro-Brazilian women are the most disadvantaged.

Affirmative action policies instituted in 2001 to increase Afro-Brazilian access to education and jobs will not reduce these racial wage differences, Lovell (2006: 83) concludes, unless wage discrimination by gender and race is eliminated. The growing Afro-descendent middle class took the initiative in pushing for these affirmative action measures in an attempt to bridge this racial divide. The highly educated Afro-descendent women who head some of the most active black women's NGOs in São Paulo are fully aware of this racial and gender divide, and are determined to fight against it. They know from experience that higher educational and occupational qualifications are not sufficient to compete on an equal basis for posts and wages, and thereby acquire a keen and acute perception of racial and gender discrimination, which

is less available to their poorer sisters, who remain locked in the struggle for everyday survival (Damasceno, 1999).

On the Atlantic coast of Central America, higher educational levels among the Afro-Creole population also failed to protect them from encroachment by *mestizos* entering from the highlands. *Mestizos* now occupy 72 per cent of the land on the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast, which was once dominated by Afro-Creoles (Gordon, 1998). But continuing migration abroad has reduced their numbers and left the remaining population largely dependent on remittances. The Afro-Creole population along the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica is making more progress, however, because they receive more state support than in Nicaragua (Putnam, 2002). A 1990 study of the Afro-Creole population of Limon by McIlwaine (1997) suggests that the women are faring better than men, and are more competitive than *mestiza* women. Afro-Creole women have higher educational levels than *mestizas*, and earn more. Afro-Creole women are also more likely to be employed in professional jobs such as nursing and teaching. Incomes within Afro-Creole households are higher, due to higher labour force participation by Afro-Creole women, and to remittances, especially from abroad (mainly the US), which constituted 70 per cent of non-earned income (McIlwaine, 1997: 7). As McIlwaine points out, paid employment has long been at the core of Afro-Creole women's identity, whereas *mestiza* women are more closely identified with the domestic domain, and face greater objections by males to their working. Here we see again the consequences of different gender ideologies for Afro-descendent and *mestiza* women. However, Afro-Creole women remain virtually excluded from key decision-making positions occupied by *mestizo* men, even in health and education, arenas in which women predominate professionally.

Afro-Creole men have been largely confined to manual unionised jobs in the ports and on the railways, which are now closing down and/or being automated. Both men and women have been severely impacted by government budget cuts and now face large-scale unemployment. As in Nicaragua, this has contributed to massive emigration, estimated in the early 1990s at 30 per cent, primarily of men (McIlwaine, 1997: 12)

Epsy Campbell, an Afro-Creole woman from Costa Rica, has long been active in the struggle for gender and racial equality. She is the former President of the Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Women, and was elected in 2002 as a congresswoman. In 2005 Epsy was elected president of her party, the PAC (Partido Accion Ciudadana) and also ran a close race for the

Vice-Presidency of the country in 2006. She has called for affirmative action policies to end the poverty and social exclusion of Afro-descendants, especially women. She decries the absence of women in the formal political realm, noting that there are less than 40 Afro-descendent women at national-level politics in all of Latin America, and 26 of those are in Brazil (www.thedialogue.org/jac/eng/events/Afro-LatinAmericanWomen'sLeadershipEpsyCampbell.htm). She urges Afro-descendent women to become more active as elected officials and in political parties, despite the patriarchal political structures in Latin America. In her own party, the PAC, 50/50 gender equity is observed in all of its structures, but there are still only two Afro-descendent women leaders in the party.

Afro-descendent women are certainly more politically active in Brazil, which aids them in pressuring the state to redress racial and gender inequities, as we shall see in the next section.

Pressuring the state to redress inequities

The state, as Eva Thorne (2000) and others have noted, not only responds to race and ethnic-based movements, but shapes them. This is particularly true in Latin America and the Caribbean, where all states, newly independent in the 19th and 20th centuries, shared a goal of biological and cultural *mestizaje* designed to forge a homogeneous and unified nation out of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society. *Mestizaje* was designed to blur racial differences through a process of physical and cultural racial mixing, in which, however, *blanqueamiento* or “whitening” remained the goal. The failure to recognise distinct racial and ethnic groups as citizens of the nation with equal rights led to the social exclusion of indigenous and Afro-descendent groups. Their needs were not met, and their access to educational and occupational resources and other basic services was very limited. Most Latin American and Caribbean states still have not established separate categories for Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples in the national census, making it difficult to measure racial and ethnic inequalities. Lack of adequate statistical data makes these groups invisible, and continues to hamper policies designed to address their poverty and neglect.

Latin American governments justify their denial of racial differences on scientific grounds, arguing that since race is no longer valid as a biological category, it should no longer be measured or differentiated through the census (Guimaraes, 1999: 144). This contributed to the replacement of the word “race”

by “ethnicity” in scientific texts and government documents during the last 50 years, starting in the post-war period, while skin colour categories remained. Latin American governments argue that the denial of race implies rejection of racism, and in turn the possibility of racial discrimination. However, such a stance ignores the importance of the social construction of race, which is still used to differentiate and discriminate against the Afro-descendent population. In fact, several scholars contend that cultural or class criteria (which deem white European culture and civilisation as supreme) have come to replace biological phenotype as the primary basis of discrimination in Latin America (Guimaraes, 2001; de la Cadena, 2001). To quote de la Cadena (2001: 16), “culture has been racialized”.

Afro-descendent women’s NGOs in Brazil have been particularly effective in pointing out the importance of using racial classifications in public health and the diagnosis of disease. Illnesses commonly found in the Afro-Brazilian population include diabetes type-2, uterine myoma or tumour, hypertension or high blood pressure, and sickle-cell anaemia, found in the Afro-descendent population globally. Infant and maternal mortality rates are also much higher in this Afro-descendent population (Oliveira, 2003). Jurema Werneck (2003), director of Criola, an Afro-descendent women’s NGO in Rio, ties the high incidence of Aids/HIV among young black women to their poverty and vulnerability, although the incidence has declined with an effective national programme launched in 1988 by the Ministry of Health, whereby medication to control Aids/HIV is available free to whoever needs it.

It is clear that these health inequalities by race cannot be subsumed under class differences, as some illnesses may be genetically linked. Even hereditary predispositions, however, are aggravated by poverty and lack of access to adequate health resources.

Contrary to the state’s earlier thesis of racial democracy, racial inequalities are not diminishing with economic development and the improvement of educational and occupational opportunities among the Afro-descendent population. The fallacies inherent in racial democracy were made apparent by the rise of an educated black middle class, which nevertheless still suffers from discrimination in terms of jobs, wages, and access to state services. In fact, competition may be greater among people of higher status, as we have seen in the case of the wider wage gaps between Afro-Brazilian and white professional women.

The Brazilian state now has begun to question the principle of racial democracy and to give some support to affirmative action policies to benefit

the Afro-descendent population (Htun, 2004). The Durban World Conference on Racism, where 400 Brazilians, black, white, female and male, formed the official delegation, played a major role in addressing racism and its consequences.⁷ In 2002, President Cardoso issued a National Affirmative Action Programme charged with studying the feasibility of percentage goals for blacks, women and physically challenged people in public service. In that same year, Bahia's state university announced that 40 per cent of places in undergraduate and graduate programmes were to be reserved for Afro-Brazilians. Later, some other state universities followed suit.

Such policies have been seriously questioned on the grounds that they will only benefit the black middle class and may reinforce racial identities (Guimaraes, 2000), leading to the kinds of racial dichotomies that exist in the US. We also saw earlier that increasing educational and occupational qualifications for Afro-descendents will not solve the problem of inequality as long as discrimination continues in jobs and wages (Lovell, 2006). The scholarship aid given to Afro-descendent students is limited largely to tuition fees (exempting living expenses), partly because of the difficult financial situation in Brazil.

The 2002 electoral success of the Workers Party, with strong black support and the installation of the labour union leader Lula (Luis Ignacio da Silva) as President, suggests that class-based inter-racial solidarity may be more important than strictly racial consciousness, in terms of building political support.⁸ This is not a return to class-based racial democracy, but an acknowledgement of the demographic fact that most Afro-descendents are poor, as are a near majority of white Brazilians (Guimaraes, 2001). To underline the importance of class, Telles (1999) observes that race has never served as the basis for overt legal discrimination in Brazil, nor as the basis for marked residential segregation, but there are marked class residential differences nonetheless.

However, relying on class-based institutions like political parties and labour unions for access to political power may disadvantage Afro-descendent women. Although they have always been very active at the community and family level, with some now organised into NGOs, this has not translated into political power. Brazil in 2001 instituted a 30 per cent quota of women as candidates in political parties, but this has yet to be fully implemented (Lebon, 2001). Part of the problem is that Afro-descendent women organised into NGOs have been unable to mobilise mass grassroots support. This has been aggravated by the institutionalisation of the women's movement throughout Latin American

and the Caribbean in recent years. Institutionalised women's NGOs have turned away from their grassroots constituencies in favour of focusing their attention on the state and lobbying (Alvarez et al, 2003; Lebon, 1996). Afro-Brazilian women's NGOs are now heavily involved in policy issues, and formed one-third of the National Council of Women's Rights in Brazil in 2001. While this has led to some success in terms of pressuring the government to implement affirmative action policies, and to disaggregate race- and gender-based data on health, education, wages, and so on, lobbying places a heavy time burden on these NGOs, and also restricts their ability to communicate with the grassroots, who often feel neglected. This in turn weakens their political support base, which may be one reason why implementation of racial and gender legislation has lagged so markedly in the Latin American region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite greater rhetorical support for racial and cultural pluralism, and the efforts of Afro-descendent organisations to press their claims for greater cultural recognition and for more state resources to address the needs of the Afro-descendent population, whitening and assimilation through *mestizaje* is still the clear preference of most Latin American and Caribbean states. As a recent analysis of the stalemate in the Zapatista's⁹ quest for autonomy argues, the neo-liberal state recognises a plurality of indigenous (and Afro-descendent) identities, so long as "those identities do not become the basis for collective organisation around substantive rights" (Stahler-Sholk, 2005: 37). The emphasis on individualism within the neoliberal economy erodes solidarity and eventually destroys the basis for collective action.

Latin American states undoubtedly remain concerned that the social mobilisation of Afro-descendent populations may promote internal dissent and fragmentation, but the Afro-Brazilian experiment suggests that this is not the case. It is possible for Afro-descendent groups to promote their own cultural identity and welfare, yet remain loyal to the larger nation-state, particularly if, as in Brazil, the state moves toward a more pluralistic framework. Where the state demands conformity to a rigid *mestizo* model of *blanqueamiento*, as in Nicaragua, then racial and ethnic minorities may become alienated and lose a sense of national allegiance.

Afro-descendent groups are not rejecting *mestizaje* per se, rather the bias toward *blanqueamiento* promoted in earlier Eurocentric versions. They wish to redefine *mestizaje* so as to have their own cultural identity valued on an equal

footing with that of whites or *mestizos*, which would require access to the resources and services which many of the latter enjoy at present. Reform would also replace racial democracy with racial pluralism, coupled with a recognition of the need for collective rights. Thus, social inclusion need not be based on homogenisation, but on an appreciation of the existing racial and ethnic diversity in Latin American and the Caribbean. The roles that women play in these Afro-descendent movements argue for a greater concern for gender and racial equality in the quest for greater social justice in the region.

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Footnotes

- 1 This is an updated and revised version of an article published as “Questioning *Mestizaje*: The Social Mobilization of Afrodescendent Women in Latin America” in Max Kirsch’s edited book, *Inclusion and Exclusion in the Global Arena* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 2 Santiago was the site of the regional preparatory conference for the Third UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001.

- 3 *Mestizos* are persons of mixed indigenous and white racial descent, while the term mulatto refers to persons of mixed black and white descent.
- 4 For example, Law 70 in Colombia aims to guarantee ethnic rights for Afro-Colombians, but requires extensive documentation to obtain collective land rights in the historically isolated Chocó region. Gathering this documentation has been hampered by escalating violence on the part of paramilitary, government and guerilla forces (which drives peasants off the land) and increasing tensions with indigenous populations in the Chocó (Arocha, 1998). The Nicaraguan government failed to provide financial support to implement autonomy on the Atlantic coast, as stipulated in the Autonomy Law.
- 5 For more on Afro-descendent and indigenous movements, see Safa 2005.
- 6 Lovell's sample is limited to wage earners aged 18–64 in São Paulo and omits the self-employed and the unemployed, whose large number among Afro-descendents would have increased the degree of racial inequality even more dramatically.
- 7 Significant support in preparing for this conference and for Afro-Brazilians generally was provided by the Ford Foundation.
- 8 Lula was elected to a second term in October 2006, despite fierce class-based opposition.
- 9 In 1994, the Zapatista Army of Liberation (EZLN) began to protest encroachment by the Mexican government in the southern border state of Chiapas, which is heavily indigenous.

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"Con-di-fi-cation": Black women, leadership and political power¹

Carole Boyce Davies



Every colonized person who today accepts a governmental post must know clearly that he will sooner or later be called upon to sponsor a policy of repression, of massacres, of collective murders in one of the regions of... the [French] empire (Fanon, 1958: 118).

The exigencies of projecting US power, conditioned by the ever-present rhetoric of the threat of terrorism, but not determined by it, transcends party and racial affiliations and ensures that those black Americans – and for that matter other people of color and women – who rise to positions of strategic foreign policy construction will substantially represent state interests above all others (Lusane, 2006: 197).

Introduction

What happens when members of a subordinated group rise to power within an oppressive system? Who do these people end up representing? How does a black American woman manage the internal/domestic histories while understanding her location in diaspora and transnational spaces? What happens when a member of a subordinated group now ends up being the face of empire? How do class, status and political affiliation affect the nature of one's participation in the political and intellectual process? How do we begin to subject the rise of black women to leadership positions to the kind of internal critique that is fair and necessary?

This article responds to these questions by examining the meaning of Condoleezza Rice, a black woman secretary of state of the US (2005 to the present), and therefore the international spokesperson for contemporary American imperialism.

The rise of black women to various positions in state power between 2005 and 2006 is one of the historical contexts in which Condoleezza Rice can also be placed. In many ways, it reflects decades of feminist activity that challenged the logic that leadership is always and only male. With Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf,

the new president of Liberia, Portia Simpson Miller, Prime Minister of Jamaica, and Michaëlle Jean, recently appointed Governor General of Canada, we have the beginnings for an analysis of their contributions and failings once they access political power. Earlier, Valerie Amos in London became Baroness Amos, appointed by the Blair government to a ceremonial position and title in the House of Lords. What is different, perhaps, is that Condoleezza Rice has risen to power in the belly of US imperialism; and in order to be successful, she seems to have to work towards being the most efficient articulator of its machinations.

A brief comparison with other black women who have sought to make similar moves toward the centre of US state power is worth considering. The variety of congresswomen of integrity and recognition such as Barbara Jordan of Texas (who distinguished herself during the Watergate hearings) and Barbara Lee of California (the only congresswoman to vote against the war) provide a different model. Rice has indicated in most interviews that that she would never run for the office of president, preferring instead the kind of appointments she has had.

Perhaps more significant to this discussion is the former congresswoman from Brooklyn, Shirley Chisholm, who, in 1972, became the first African-American and the first woman to run for the US presidency. While she may be forgotten or unknown by a new generation, her example is worth recalling at least to provide some balance to the type of black woman like Rice who now serves as the media-driven black political role-models of choice. Congresswoman Chisholm, a member of the Brooklyn Caribbean diaspora community, campaigned with the slogan “unbought and unbossed”, offering a political position of integrity, claiming to navigate power on her terms, actually being the person who ran for that same office Condoleezza now helps to keep alive – and without having to go down on her knees to powerful white men.

Based on a presence and politics that is the opposite of Chisholm, “bought and bossed” is one way of seeing Rice, given the range of benefits she has accrued on various boards of multinational corporations as she rose to this position. With a politics aligned with representing the interests of US imperialism and multinational corporations, Rice has served the interests of big business, has been on the boards of directors of Chevron, TransAmerica Corporation, Hewlett Packard, J. P. Morgan and Charles Schwab. Antonia Felix reports:

Condi joined the Board of Directors of Chevron Corporation, a multinational with oil operations in 25 countries, immediately upon returning to Stanford in 1991. Her expertise on the states that made up the former Soviet Union

made her a valuable asset for Chevron's oil interests in Kazakhstan. She worked extensively on those deals, including their plan to help build the pipeline from the Tengiz oil field across southern Russia to a Russian port on the Black Sea. Like her Hoover Institution colleague, George Schultz, who served as a director of Chevron before she arrived at the company, Condi supplemented her Stanford income with fees from Chevron that included a \$35 000-per-year retainer and \$1 500 for each board and committee meeting attended. By her tenth year with the company, she held over 3 000 shares at Chevron, stock worth \$241 000. Also like Schultz, she had a supertanker named after her – the 136 000-deadweight-ton SS Condoleezza Rice. (2005: 256–257).²

Often the only woman in the company of the world's most powerful men, with an Exxon tanker named after her, The S. S. Condoleezza Rice, her status as handmaiden to multinational corporations has been already metaphorically identified. By these means then, her name is no longer private property, and can also be moved from its personal to its corporate identification, as have the names of Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart.

But even more salient is the unabated loyalty she gives to one of the already-acknowledged worst presidents in US history. While this is an analysis that has to be carefully nuanced, the fact is that all biographical coverage defines Condoleezza as perhaps the most loyal of supporters of the president. Because she is also now noted for her ability to offer a quick and professional articulation of the most inane Bush policy position, she is also now identified as the major ventriloquist for US imperialism.

Ventriloquising imperialism

Charles Lusane offers a very detailed reading of the foreign policy operations of Rice and Powell in his *Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice: Foreign Policy, Race and the New American Century*. He sees them as willing actors:

That Powell and Rice committed themselves to an administration that let blind ideological rigidity override competence, fairness, tolerance, and restraint, says much. More than innocent bystanders or dupes, both are implicated in Bush's failed presidency as part of the insider team and council that created and implemented his vision and agenda. Neither, to this day, has disavowed the Bush domestic and international doctrine of hegemony and power politics and the expense of domestic progress and global cooperation and development (2006: 187).

It is this process of black ventriloquising of imperialism which deserves its own language by which we can chart this and future actions that follow this pattern. “Condification” defines the process of the conservative black and/or female subject in power and working publicly against the larger interests of the groups to which s/he belongs. It therefore refers to a particular agent of a form of neo-colonialism, one very specific to US internal colonial dynamics and history. By these means, “condification” defines what happens when a black person, woman or Latino enters these same power structures and never or rarely identifies with their originating group’s interests, even when this is the status quo for white masculinity (i.e., representing its interests). “Condification” demands that one forgets one’s group interests and instead works to ensure its continued dominance. “Condification” also offers a language to identify the process of intellectuals (in this instance, the black female intellectual) from oppressed groups, who enter the seats of power and then use their knowledge with calmness for the benefit of oppression – in this case, American imperialism. The term “condification” is beautifully already prepared by the subject’s name that now lends itself to this definition. Thus, “cond-i-fi-cation” carries within it the “con” of conservatism; the “con” of being conned, along with the resonance of commodification, in the sense of being bought and/or sold for a particular interest. It also suggests the Fanonian self-alienating psychology of “conditioning” and “confusion” that is the ultimate product of racism as it is colonialism,³ that is, being conditioned to work in the interest of a repressive state and against one’s own larger interest.

Being “condified”, then, refers to the public positioning of oppressive black conservatism and the normalising of the same while supporting amazingly offensive policies and politics, and masquerading them when convenient under a black umbrella. Being “condified” means being treated to a public “sweetness” or politeness, which functions as a camouflage for more insidious policies. Being “condified” ultimately means being extremely colonised or subjected to “condification”.

At the start of her appointment, the tendency was to see the former national security advisor (2001–2005) and current US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, as someone to be admired for occupying such a central position – and therefore a role model for young black women, someone that they could emulate. There are in fact reports that among women in a variety of African countries, she is also seen as a type of ideal black woman, one who has made it to the top of US state power by whatever means and that achievement itself

was to be admired. This rise to power began in 2000 when, following a highly contested national election, President Bush was selected as president of the US. He created perhaps the most ethnically diverse cabinet in history when he appointed two African-Americans and one Latino to key positions. Following the foreign policy debacle of, from all accounts, the pre-planned execution of the invasion of and War on Iraq (erroneously using the 9–11 terrorist actions on the US as pretext), and with the Bush administration on the wane, these perceptions now seem rather different.⁴ Indeed, in the wake of the treatment of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the view is quite the opposite among black youth and adults: pride at her accomplishments,⁵ dismay at the absence of any benefits to black Americans.

Sylvia Wynter's take on Condoleezza Rice is instructive. Seeing her up close at Stanford, she describes Rice as "a black Margaret Thatcher", not just for her manifestation of Thatcher's trademark rigidity, but also for showing the tendency of some lower-middle class individuals (such as Thatcher was) to seek to escape their origins by all means.⁶ Stuart Hall's definition of "Thatcherism" is appropriately invoked here, given that in much the same way, "condification" has become the public presentation in the body of a woman (in this case, a black woman) of a range of policies that dismantle long and hard-fought-for rights, while defending this process with an amazing level of aggression. Hall defines "Thatcherism" as follows:

Thatcherism's project can be understood as operating on the ground of longer, deeper, more profound movements of change which appear to be going its way but which, in reality, it has been only occasionally and fleetingly, in command over the past decade. We can see Thatcherism as, in fact, an attempt to hegemonize these deeper tendencies within its project of "regressive modernization", to appropriate them to a reactionary political agenda and to harness to them the interests and fortunes of specific and limited social interests (1996: 224).

If Thatcherism is for Hall an attempt only partially successful in the task of "harness[ing] and bend[ing] to its political project circumstances which were not of its making" (1996: 224), then "condification" and "being condied" also involves being subjected to a certain maintenance of dominance under a cover of "sweetness", as in "con-dol-cee-za" – the original meaning of the name as given by her mother from the musical notation "with sweetness". Thus, cordiality and super-professionalism conveniently camouflage an appropriation of political movements as they simultaneously reject their larger historical implications.

“Condification” marks the limit, in my view, but can also be seen as the ultimate manifestation of a domestic black and/or feminist bourgeois discourse of women or black people’s access to power – thus having equal opportunity to oppress. At the same time, it becomes an affront to black feminist positions as expressed in their earliest and therefore most radical formations.⁷

The intent here is not to make “condification” an ideology or an “ism” (a body of thought or ideology that percolates through the implementation of policies and the articulation of a particular set of ideological principles). Instead, I want to present “condification” as a tendency, a project perhaps, a behavioural process that marks the rise of a certain neo-colonial elite in the US imperial context, operating for the benefit of the dominant state and its rulers.

Aime Cesaire describes US imperialism as the only imperialism from which one cannot recover intact (1972/2000: 76). Thus, within the framework of US imperialist desires and practices, we are in the “American hour”, in which “violence, excess, waste, mercantilism, bluff, conformism, stupidity, vulgarity, disorder” operates. So how does the intellectual navigate the contemporary globalised economies dominated by multinational corporations with a new “international division of labour,” a global poor and urban “underclasses... left behind on every significant dimension of social opportunity”? (Hall, 1996: 225).

Several other attempts have been made over the years to identify the nature of the co-optation of intellectual work in/for black communities. W. E. B. DuBois himself reversed his own formulation, finding in the end that he had not accounted sufficiently for the selfishness of the “talented tenth”. Still his double consciousness model lingers here as well, as does Zora Neale Hurston’s formulation of the “pet negro system”. Here she describes a certain mutual benefit to dominating white society as to the co-opted black intellectual or creative figure (1979: 156). Numerous examples of this abound regarding Rice’s relationship with and service to the Bush family. Bob Woodward in *Bush at War* reports that after her parents died, George and Laura Bush became in effect Condi’s family: she spent her vacations with them and was almost part of the household (2002: 34). Still, the “like one of the family” option for black subjects has an entirely other interpretation and history as it relates to the hierarchy of domestic service in white households, and generally to black service to white dominance.

Woodward’s *Bush at War* (2002) and *State of Denial* (2006) reference several situations that are not very flattering of Rice, who as secretary of

state seems to be bereft of the independence carried by her office, and too embedded in the Bush family pathologies. In *Bush at War* he gives examples in which the President states that Rice's job is to "bear the brunt of some of the fire ... to take the edge off a little bit. And she's good at that" (2002: 158). He is further cited as providing a revision for his purposes of the secretary of state position:

I was growing a little impatient. I can be an impatient person. Plus I feel comfortable being – one of the things I can be totally unscripted or unrehearsed with Condi. That's the nature of her job, is to absorb my – is to help, you know, kind of say, well Mr. President I appreciate that point of view, and I think you probably ought to think this way a little bit (158) ... She is a very thorough person, constantly mother-henning me (256).

Patricia Hill Collins had earlier suggested:

African-American women intellectuals are nurtured in this larger black women's community [which has created] *the outsider-within stance* ... leading to a generalized black woman culture of resistance. Out of the dialectic of oppression and activism come the experiences of African-American women generally that stimulate the ideas of Black Women intellectuals (1991: 12).

However, any construction of a generalised and uniform black/women's community seems directly challenged in scenes such as captured by Woodward. As Rice entertains for the "Big House", plays the piano for the Bush family, spends weekends in Kennebunkport (where she coached the president-to-be), stays in the small house in the family compound in Crawford, Texas during her vacations, and functions as the professor-as-homeschooler to an untrained and unprepared new president, the narrative is further complicated. For Condoleezza is also confident that she wants to demonstrate at each occasion that she is better at European culture than most white people, including the Bushes – and clearly she is.

Condoleezza Rice functions fully inside this dominance and seems to live out the "equal opportunity to oppress" model that Lorde identified in her "Equal Opportunity Poem" (1986: 16–18). Thus her description of Bush to Oprah Winfrey as a smart and intelligent man, which flies in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. Perhaps this is all another grand performance in the masking tradition of Darlene Clark Hine's definition of dissimulation. One of the criticisms of Rice, both as national security advisor and secretary of state, is that she has functioned as the person who flatters the president most,

operates with a fierce loyalty that Bush demands, and as a result has not been able to take a balanced and objective view of very dangerous world situations. In what has now been described as one of the world's most colossal foreign policy mistakes, the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent war seem to have been undertaken without any analysis or study of foreign policy or deep knowledge of the history and culture of that area of the world. Instead the cold war logic of Soviet scholar Dr Rice has impacted policy. Woodward provides numerous examples where a more knowledgeable reading of Middle East politics would have avoided bungled policy. So, using the fall of Stalin as a model, Rice felt that Iraq would be chaotic for a while ... "But history predicted it would be temporary. In the end, she was confident, order would re-assert itself, as had happened in the old USSR" (Woodward, 2006:158-9).

The more insidious reading of this process of "condification" is Rice's performing of a myriad of other service functions for an imperialist agenda, including participating intellectually in the construction of the Vulcan ideology. The Vulcans was the name given by Rice to an extreme right wing, foreign policy group, which included policy advisors from the Bush Senior administration and bridged to George W. Bush's regime. Vulcans include George Bush Sr, Richard Armitage, Robert Zoellick, Paul Wolfowitz (now head of the World Bank), Robert Blackwill and Richard Perle. As the co-ordinator and namer of the Vulcans, we are observing the operations of "condification" at its highest manifestation. Rice indicates that she chose the name "The Vulcans" from her hometown mascot: "the Roman god who created thunderbolts and hammered metal into tools for the gods ... I grew up right there in Birmingham with Vulcan ... I remember as a little girl that it was red if there was an accident or green if everything was clear" (Rice cited in Felix, 2005: 30). In this case, the selected Birmingham, Alabama image has to do with mythical European power. Given the multi-layered civil rights iconography of Birmingham, Alabama, this selection is telling. Felix's *Condi: The Condoleezza Rice Story* (2005) and indeed all the biographies written as children's success stories (see, for example, Ditchfield, 2003; L. Wade, 2003; M. Wade, 2004; Cunningham, 2005 ; Naden and Blue, 2006) identify her as growing up in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1950s and 1960s in a family that deliberately stayed outside of civil rights activity while attempting the impossible task of protecting their daughter from the very public and visible racism that surrounded them.

But Rice is also identified as not only serving, but formulating some of the repressive Vulcan policies. Elane Sciolino in "Bush's Foreign Policy

Tutor: An Academic in the Public Eye” (2000) describes this advanced role Rice played in Bush’s nuclear policy. Rice used her credentials as a political scientist at Stanford University and as a specialist on Russia as major credibility collateral at the National Security Council during the first two years of the Bush administration. Isikoff and Corn’s *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin Scandal and the Selling of the Iraq War* (2006) indicates a central role for Rice (along with Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush) in the selling and spinning of the war (using the most forceful rhetoric in persuading the nation that war was necessary) and the maintenance of the current US position. Following the very condemnatory Baker/Hamilton commission report, an interview with Rice on the PBS NewsHour, 21 December 2006, reasserted much of the Iraq War justification narrative as she defended the Bush strategy.

The conservative intellectual with power is well-represented here. The point is that major discussions about intellectual activism such as Said’s assume some sort of progressive ideological commitment. What happens when the ideological position is not in the interest of any progressive agenda, but is in fact its opposite, and that same energetic type of intellectual activism is used for the benefit of a dominating state? This is a paradigm in which Rice becomes a major player and exercises leadership. As we have already asserted, to be “condified” is to be subject to that sweet-and-sour home-grown approach to destruction by a member of one’s formerly identifiable racial, ethnic, class or gendered community. Therefore the actual practice of black and/or women scholars who occupy leadership roles has to be similarly interrogated, now that they have the potential of creating or affecting policy.

Related examples have already been provided by neo-colonial elites in Africa and the Caribbean. Condoleezza Rice, a black woman as the face of US foreign policy to the rest of the world, confirms that one cannot assume that one’s contribution is automatically radical because it comes from a member of a subordinated group. As a black woman conservative with US power, she articulates an identity that has not been seen to be publicly operating in this way before. Other conservative spokespeople from subordinated communities in myriad locations around the world resonate in minor ways but with similar effect, even with more localised impact. In Rice’s case, the international implications demand the kind of scrutiny offered here.

Exceptionalism as strategy

The mythic media construction of Condoleezza as “the [exceptionally] smart black woman” also becomes a typical singling out of one member of a subordinated group as many others with similar talents are erased. In other words, there is a public sense that she is the only black woman who can answer questions in a professional style and presentation well recognised by those in the academy. Condoleezza, with normal academic credentials, herself admits in one interview that coming from Stanford, she is used to intellectuals producing many more books than she had in the same time frame. In her first eight years at Stanford, she is identified as publishing 15 articles and subsequently her dissertation, *Uncertain Allegiance: The Soviet Army and the Czechoslovak Army* (Princeton University Press, 1984). This was followed by an edited collection, *The Gorbachev Era*, co-edited with Alexander Dallin (Stanford Alumni Press, 1986) and a jointly authored *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Stagecraft* (Harvard University Press, 1995) with Philip Zelikow – average output for an academic at her level. What was significant, however, was her area of expertise, which few African-Americans specialised in, and her grooming for international relations work at Denver and Stanford.

Condoleezza therefore describes herself as a Europeanist, in the sense that her research expertise focuses on Europe, discussing it within its own terms. Ironically, in today’s world, lacking the kind of information or black world knowledge which African Studies develops represents a huge gap, indeed a lack of knowledge of most of the world. Being a Europeanist and being an Africanist are neither symmetrical in relation to the functioning of the academy, nor assigned the same value, academic space or size. Being a Europeanist in fact means specialising in the mainstream of the already European Studies-oriented academy in which African Studies is marginalised. According to Felix, when Rice was appointed national security adviser:

She also had to discuss her own limitations and admitted that the candidate was not the only one with much to learn. Condi’s career as a Soviet scholar gave her insight into that part of the world but little background in the political histories of other regions. She did not have a strong grasp of America’s policies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or other non-European nations, and had to undergo her own crash course in those areas (34). “I’ve been pressed to understand parts of the world that have not been part of my scope,” she said. “I’m really a Europeanist.” (2005: 34–35).

This means that she was uninformed (as she indicates in her own self-description) about the rest of the world, having earlier seen African Studies and other related “ethnic studies programmes” as not critical to her intellectual roundedness in terms of knowledge, the kind of information that attempts to account for lives outside the European world. Being a Europeanist thus also means a silencing and denial of colonialism, imperialism, and racial and sexual conquest.⁸

So in a world in which, as Wynter says, “everything Black has been negatively marked, and everything white has been positively marked” (2006), how does the black subject position her/himself? The best reading is offered by Fanon-defined black “self-alienation”, which is significant as it suggests that “the black alienated subject carries a consciousness that does not function in his best interest ... indeed it has to negate everything black in order to be that ideal representation of the human” (2006).

It makes sense therefore that it was under Rice’s leadership that Black Studies at Stanford would be dismantled from a model that had developed, via St Clair Drake, with a diaspora orientation. In the eyes of black Stanford alumni who had struggled as students to make Black Studies a permanent feature of their university’s experience, Provost Rice did nothing to advance this cause. Rice herself has conceded that some of the decisions she made at Stanford were perhaps too hard.

The issue of bourgeois American feminism in its general sense is perhaps the easiest lens with which to approach this issue.⁹ In the case of the State Department, the rise of individuals such as Madeleine Albright was seen as evidence of women challenging the fraternity of men in leadership of the State Department. According to Antonia Felix, Madeleine Albright had throughout her career “been committed to the advancement of women in the field, and she considered her cabinet appointment a victory for all women” (2005: 309–310). If Madeleine Albright was seen as challenging the location of women in subordinate roles, one of the principles of US bourgeois feminism, then Condoleezza turned out to be the most fitting representative of black and female success according to the model of the dominant society – highly accommodationist, conservative, clever – but not for the benefit of the wider black communities.¹⁰

The model of choice for Condoleezza, however, is not Albright, her female predecessor, but the late Jean Kirkpatrick, hard-line US representative to the United Nations, who at her passing was identified by the Secretary of State’s office as follows: “This is somebody that the Secretary knew quite well. She

looked up to her as a role model, somebody who as a more senior policymaker and a senior academic always had time for more junior people, people like Condoleezza Rice, who was then coming up through the ranks of academia.”¹¹ But Kirkpatrick was also known for her extreme conservatism and also that same Thatcher-like rigidity.

There is no indication that I have seen so far that Rice sees herself as articulating any black and/or feminist positions, even as she benefits from their political work. Perhaps the closest one gets is in her speech to the American Baptist convention.¹² Here Condoleezza announces, to applause from a group of largely white men, that once she finishes her term it will be 12 years since a white man has held the position of secretary of state. The rhetorical question we can ask in response is: Has this made our world any better? From all accounts, the world seems a much worse place to those whose lives continue to be destroyed. Moreover, intellectuals in power operating for the benefit of an oppressive state, such as this one, bear some responsibility for participating in this process, even leading it at times.

The link between Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* [The Wretched of the Earth], and the logic of condemnation or election is fascinating in this context. Living out, if not publicly advancing, a bourgeois feminist position occupies the same pole as an effaced blackness. In other words, how do we account for the “damned” and the “wretched” who remain the sizable population of black communities wherever they are, even as selected black beneficiaries reap the rewards of struggle? The New Orleans Hurricane Katrina debacle makes this point clear, for the wretched were visibly abandoned without any support.¹³

The levees and the limits

In “Towards African Diaspora Citizenship,”¹⁴ I identified as constitutive the long history of forced migration, which displaced African peoples, moving them globally from a range of political formations in pre-colonial nations, empires and other smaller ethnic political structures. This logic of diaspora is what, in some contexts, drives some understanding of related formations and varied geographical conditions. One of the key features of this understanding is that the majority of these groups, exploited for centuries, remained consistently debased and disenfranchised in their new locations. African-Americans are prominently located as one of these groups. In the US in particular, conditions existed of labour abuse, the denial of rights, beatings, maimings and other forms of physical brutality which accompanied the processes of jim-crowding,

sharecropping and extreme racial segregation – all of which can be seen as the equivalent to an internal colonialism that succeeded plantation slavery.

The intent of Pan-Africanism was to make itself a practical and achievable political reality – one that went beyond the rhetorical articulations. And one can now see the results of the great deal of work that has gone into identifying the contours of the African diaspora. A dynamic library of and discourse on African diaspora studies (see, for instance, Harris, 1993; Okpewho, 1996; Boyce Davies, 2002; Edwards, 2003; Gomez, 2003) is helping to shape the contemporary understanding of the diaspora. It is here that the relevance of St Clair Drake, who developed Stanford's Black Studies Program, becomes relevant to this discussion. Drake's "Diaspora Studies and Pan-Africanism" offers a thoughtful overview of the ways that diaspora and Pan-Africanism as concepts interact, function concurrently and provide research agendas for the future. This was a project which at Stanford, perhaps with some imagination, could have provided an imaginative research agenda and even an African diaspora "think tank" along the lines of other versions at Stanford if it had been well-supported at the institutional level.

The maintenance of some clear connections – cultural, economic, demographic and political – for the advancement of African-descended people has nevertheless remained a constant feature even as the critique of essentialised identities and imagined communities remain. Historically, black public intellectuals, including the conservative Booker T. Washington, have accommodated at least some minor version of this, even if strategies have differed.

And here the issue of the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the breaking of the levees re-enters, as it revealed most starkly the frailty of citizenship rights for US African-Americans. Black people worldwide, by extension, descended again into Hurston's "infinity of conscious pain" as participants and as witnesses of another epic, slave-ship-like cycle of degradation. The absence of black political figures with the power that Rice has from this situation also has foreign policy implications, as it relates to the African diaspora policy aspect of international relations.

Recent activity on the diaspora at the political level offers perhaps the most important practical application of years of scholarship on African diaspora and the political activism of Pan-Africanism as identified by St Clair Drake. The African Union, after appropriate deliberations, has decided to account for the dispersed African populations in the traditional legacy of Pan-Africanism.

It has voted that the diaspora would be its sixth region, and various plans are in place to activate some practical features of diaspora exchange. The earlier identified inabilities of figures like Rice to be equipped intellectually to deal with these new developments resonates strongly as the US remains unaccounted for in these developments. Brazil recently hosted the Congress of African Diaspora Intellectuals (CIAD II in July, 2006) and Trinidad has already hosted a Caribbean meeting on the African diaspora sponsored by the African Union. Once again, African-American interests were not represented at the official level (although many African-American individual public intellectuals and NGOs were present), as they were also at the 2001 Conference Against Racism in Durban.

In many ways, the US imperial project as developed in the Caribbean has been the building of its version of imperialism as European imperialism has waned. The more recent attempts in the Middle East, via Iraq, have been to create a series of what Greg Thomas calls “future super-colonies”. The current disastrous result (which echoes the Césaire formulation) is that at the end of 2006, with close to a million Iraqi people killed, worsening humanitarian conditions and a country totally destroyed, the Iraqis and their neighbours have refused to consign their country to the US imperial project.

Yet in visits to Brazil and in the Caribbean, as in the US, Rice is not above using race and Jim Crow history to legitimate herself and thereby the policies of US imperialism. Beyond that, and after those encounters, we see no visible recognition of the Afro-Brazilian experience, the Caribbean experience or the African experience in US foreign policy under her leadership of the State Department – unless framed within US interests. My search for policy material that specifies US State Department policies on Africa and on the Caribbean, for example, continues to be unrewarding, except for sporadic stabs at genocide in Darfur. Repeated speeches instead describe the importance of building what Rice calls “transformational democracy”. And under the Project for the New American Century (“Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century”), the current administration’s position supports an aggressive military as is being used in Iraq (as it was in Grenada, Panama and Haiti). “Transformational democracy”, then, can also be effected by pre-emptive military action if appropriate, shorthand for US style-democracy and ultimately US imperialism.

So on the issue of the diaspora, so far, African-Americans remain officially outside of these frameworks. Some countries would say this is a good thing,

being understandably wary of US “transformational democracy” projects such as the Iraqi debacle. Still, this remains a weak spot for this Secretary of State: the inattention to the political movement to operationalise the African diaspora on the one hand; the US failed imperial projects in the “Middle East” on the other. Even a smaller project such as the inaugural Caribbean Heritage Month celebration, which took place in June 2006, seemed to happen without her public involvement. The particulars of US attempts at global hegemony may mean that US interests get acted on in this new form if the structure is malleable. In the meantime, the African-descended populations in South America have come up with their own human rights statements meant to identify their relationships to the rest of the African diaspora, their rights as linked to indigenous peoples, and the desire to be educated about the history and contours of their African and African-diaspora experience.

American imperialism, even as it wanes, has left US African-Americans in the unfortunate position of being within the belly of this beast notwithstanding, fighting its wars and representing its failed foreign policies.¹⁵ Within the “diaspora” framework, the question of US hegemony itself has to be consistently re-addressed. In a way, African-American representation has a choice: either to walk out of Durban¹⁶ officially (as Colin Powell did) rather than deal head-on with racism and imperialism; or participate in another diasporic geography that has nothing to do with having the benefit of US power.

Thus, the internal colonialism model as applied to the US, raised by thinking African-Americans in the US, is worth recalling, given the rise of people like Rice who are clearly functioning in a way recognisable to those who have seen neo-colonial elites operating in other parts of the world. The epigrammatically captive experience of the black people of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and the breaking of the levees, without access to any leadership that could represent them, is the other side of this neo-colonial construct; and there are several others that fit the contours of internal US neo-colonialism.

Michael Dawson in *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* sees the ten-point programme of the Black Panther Party as one of the articulations of this internal colonialism. Black people in the US have consistently argued for themselves as a separate nation confined within the borders of the United States, and therefore constituting an oppressed nation with the right to self-determination. The generations of early Pan-Africanists coming from the US, such as Anna Julia Cooper, and DuBois, seemed to articulate a similar point. And even before this, Martin Delaney and

David Walker made similar connections. Walker's *Appeal* addressed the "colored people of the world" prior to the formation of a diaspora language. Malcolm X later characterised the plight of African-Americans as that of an internal colony – oppressed and colonised people of the US who needed to forge links with international communities. For Malcolm X, as for a variety of leaders, the links with other colonised peoples would be openly made during the civil rights era, with references to "brothers and sisters in Asia who were colonized by the Europeans, our brothers and sisters in Africa, who were colonized by the Europeans, and in Latin America, the peasants who were colonized by the Europeans" (Cobbs Hoffman and Gjerde, 2002: 350-351).

Several complaints lodged before the UN by DuBois, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party and Claudia Jones have sought to have the dwindling human rights of African-Americans redressed. As recently as the 2000 presidential elections in Florida, African-Americans went to the UN to get their rights protected. And the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina and the broken levees reveal that even if a foreign government offered help, unless the US accepted it, then disenfranchised black communities in the South, dying from the effects of a devastating storm, could not be reached, bordered as they are in the US.

Within the internal colonialism model, then, one can see the rise of a neo-colonial elite in much the same way as this has occurred in other geographical locations. A range of black political figures and moneyed folk, entertainers and the like, act from that position. In the case of the neo-colonial elite, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas and a range of other political actors function publicly in the interest of the dominant state, and at the expense of the advancement of their communities, undoing previous and hard-won gains while repudiating these same communities' struggles. Thus, following Hurricane Katrina and the breaching of the levees, perhaps the worst disaster to befall a black people since enslavement, with all the signifiers and their referents attached, the black woman who has indicated that she can tell George Bush anything (according to an interview published in *O Magazine* in 2002); who has his ear and an amazing chemistry with him, behaved in a way that caused many to wonder how come the black woman who has the ear of the President did not make her people's life any better at a critical and historically definitive moment.

Given to using football metaphors and seeing herself as the administration's quarterback, when asked about the vision of African-Americans stranded on

rooftops in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Rice, after denying that the range of failed responses by the Bush administration was because of the race of the majority of the victims, reserved her strongest anger for the people who dared to criticise the president's lacklustre response to the disaster: "But I will tell you what I deeply resented. I resented the notion that the president of the United States, *this* president of the United States, would somehow decide to let people suffer because they were black. I found that to be the most corrosive and outrageous claim that anybody could have made, and it was wholly and totally irresponsible." When pushed a bit more by the interviewer, she indicated that it was the storm of the century, "it was certainly not because anybody wanted to be negligent or cared less because these were Black Americans. That was a ridiculous lie" (White, 2006: 187). In other words, in the range of things to be angry at in this situation, Rice is angrier at the attack on the president than on what happened to black Americans. And the misperception, in her eyes, that the Republicans have "blown off" African-Americans and Africa (actually a response to singer Kanye West's claim "George Bush does not like black people") is also a lie in her view on the grounds that Bush has given huge increases in funding to historically black colleges and has tripled his development assistance to Africa. (However, according to those on the ground, a great deal of that monetary assistance has never been paid.)

Within the logic of PNAC (Project for a New American Century – actually an American imperialist project) and the official "transformational democracy" position of the Bush government, with Condoleezza, a African-American as the primary face of US foreign policy to the world, and given that "global hegemony" is one of the US missions, Condoleezza and the process of "condification", represents for me the possibility of a global US hegemony articulated through the most deceptive and cynical of ways – the face of a black woman. From all reports, she thinks of US foreign policy largely in terms of US national and strategic interest, with the US maintaining international leadership.

Although at the height of her professional career, still with many more miles to go, many US African-Americans still live in the seemingly false hope that someone with access to the ear of the president (especially given that in the understanding of politics in Washington, DC, access means power) will at some point be able to *represent* them, thereby transforming that access power to something tangibly useful for the African diaspora.

Practices of power

A new subject of study for black feminist intellectuals must then be the practices of black women in power and political leadership. Condoleezza Rice, as we have established, is one of these seemingly powerful women, acknowledged as being the closest person to the president on his Cabinet. The question is how someone who has acquired this level of power can best exercise leadership. Since Rice is also identified as intimate friend and confidante of the president, identified as having amazing chemistry with him, “home-schooling” him on international affairs, pronunciation of words, names of foreign leaders, and consistently creating much of the foreign policy that he articulates,¹⁷ she must surely then be subjected to the same scrutiny as him. Bush himself has described her in the often-quoted phrase as able to “explain to me foreign policy matters in a way I can understand”.

Rice’s co-optation of the civil rights narrative and the women’s movement is used for the purposes of war and imperialism, even as she maintains that her race and gender are irrelevant to her options. It is not unusual to hear Rice comparing the war on Iraq with the American Civil War and the liberation of the enslaved Africans. In a recent article in *Essence Magazine*, with its known black readership, she was asked by the interviewer about the \$250 billion cost of the war, the deaths and wounding of tens of thousands of military and civilian people, and whether the war was a right thing since she had supported it from the start. Rice responded with perhaps one of the most incredible political cartwheels ever seen, claiming that slavery might have lasted longer in the US if the North had decided to end the war early: “I’m sure there are people who thought that it was a mistake to fight the Civil War to its end and to resist that the emancipation of slaves would hold. I know there were people who said why don’t we get out of this now, take a peace with the South, but leave the South with slaves?” (White 2006: 187). By these means, then, she appropriates the liberation of black people from enslavement to make the case for its opposite: the imperialist invasion and destruction of the once sovereign nation of Iraq, the resulting deaths of numerous US soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people, and the destruction of the physical infrastructure of Baghdad, once one of the world’s most beautiful cities.

In the final analysis, this is the conundrum of accessing power in a context of domination that Lusane, following Fanon, articulates in the quotations that open this piece. One either acquiesces, as the Fanonian example suggests, or acts swiftly and with principle for the benefit of one’s communities, knowing that

this access to power may be short-lived. Appropriating those power positions and utilising political movements, even as they are denied or erased by one's institutional interests, is a less than admirable position in which to be placed.

While we are now seeing the actual presentation through “condification” of a certain version of black female leadership, Audre Lorde’s “Equal Opportunity” poem had already imaginatively presented a black woman who has made it into the highest echelons of the US military complex, and who in this role has to assist in the execution of the worst of US policies – in this case, the invasion of Grenada. It closes tellingly with lines that present the diabolical result of this conjunction of US imperial power and black female identity:

The American deputy assistant secretary of defense
 for equal opportunity and safety
 pauses in her speech licks her dry lips
 “as you can see the Department has
 a very good record
 of equal opportunity for our women”
 swims toward safety
 through a lake of her own blood.

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Footnotes

- 1 This is a shortened version of a much longer paper presented at the Diaspora Hegemonies Conference, University of Toronto, October 2006. I thank the conference organisers for the opportunity to present preliminarily the first long version of this paper, which will be available in full on JendaJournal.com, the e-journal. The paucity of good material on this subject has prompted me to begin working towards a book on the subject. Thanks to readers Greg Thomas, Zillah Eisenstein, Monica Jardine, Babacar M'bow and anonymous reviewers of *Feminist Africa* for helpful comments at various stages of this paper's writing
- 2 The S.S. Condoleezza Rice would be renamed in 2001, as it served as a visible reminder of the Bush's administration obvious ties to the oil industry, with the White House facing questions about the appropriateness of the tanker's name. A list of other related activities while Condoleezza Rice was on the board of Chevron were identified in a protest statement distributed at the 2002 Stanford graduation by a student group. The full document is available at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/rats/condi>.
- 3 This latter point about "conditioning" is owed to Ngugi wa Thiong'o in response to my telling him what I was working on, during his book tour visit to Miami, 13 October 2006.
- 4 In a 2002 survey, then National Security Advisor Rice was viewed favourably by 41% of African-American respondents. As her role increased, some African-American commentators began to express doubts concerning Rice's stances and statements on various issues. Other writers have also noted a distance between Rice and the black community. Some have described her invoking the civil rights movement to clarify her position on the war on Iraq as cynical and offensive. Bill Fletcher, Jr, the former leader of the TransAfrica Forum, a foreign policy lobbying organisation in Washington, DC, has described her as "only black by accident." In August 2005, American musician, actor, and social activist Harry Belafonte referred to African-Americans in the Bush administration as "black tyrants". While Condi has been supported by Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women, there has not been much analysis by black feminist intellectuals. This is (as far as I know) one of the first attempts.
- 5 Conversations with students at a conference in honour of the 25th anniversary of the Women's Research and Resource Center at Spelman College in Atlanta, October 2006, indicated that while Rice might be the kind of woman that Spelman grooms in terms of poise and self-presentation, few could identify with her politically.
- 6 Available at <http://www.proudfleshjournal.com>.

- 7 See the positions of the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective, and even the earlier statements by Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Maria Stewart and Anna Julia Cooper. These articulated a radical critique of dominant US positions, rather than the “equal opportunity” model currently deployed in politics, the corporate world and some aspects of the academic world as well.
- 8 Zillah Eisenstein makes this point. Her own work on Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice (*Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race And War In Imperial Democracy*, forthcoming from Zed Press) makes some important allied arguments about the failure of these practices for the meaning of feminism.
- 9 Elaine Brown, for instance, identifies both Colin Powell and Condoleezza within the context of neo-slavery as “New Age House Negroes” and “New Age House Negresses”, and also suggests that within feminism, Condoleezza can be seen as a black feminist icon. See <http://www.proudfleshjournal.com/vol1.2/interview-eb.html> for more.
- 10 Conscious that one cannot assume any generic and uniform community, there is nevertheless a larger African-descended population that continues to be disenfranchised, and which many intellectuals and politicians have sought to represent. The question as to whether Condoleezza has any black “community” to which she owes anything came up as a question in the first presentation of this paper in Toronto, October, 2006.
- 11 Press briefing, 8 December 2006.
- 12 Available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/67896.htm>.
- 13 Clarence Lusane sees the Katrina disaster as having even more impact than the Iraq war in unmasking horrendous domestic policies that have consistently disregarded the poor (2006: 181–197).
- 14 Forthcoming in the collection *Black Geographies*, edited by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods.
- 15 An unpublished paper by Anton Allahar describes this “capitalist democracy” in his “unpublished paper “The Other Side of Democracy: the US and the War on Terror,” which he graciously shared with me in October 2006, following the presentation of a version of this paper at the University of Western Ontario.
- 16 Durban in South Africa hosted the International Conference Against Racism in 2001.
- 17 All of the biographies have identified this point. See, for example, Jacqueline Edmonson’s biography of Rice, which indicates that she made lists of foreign leaders for him and would rehearse them with him while doing things like exercising together (64).

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The trek for a sense of belonging

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In this piece, I present the journey I have taken in opposing the trend in British academia to marginalise black women. I discuss the impact of black feminist perspectives and practices upon my quest for self-knowledge by referring to Patricia Hill Collins' notion of the "outsider within". Yearning for an imagined sense of home, I have a desire to discover African identities and cultures. I am increasingly aware that the empowering inclusion that I have searched for in British society is not determined by my abode; rather, I can feel acceptance only from within. The celebration of my African and Caribbean heritage has been a vital means of challenging my subordinate status in Britain. My visions of Africa and the Caribbean invigorate a sense of self-respect that revitalises my pride, purpose and direction. Through different debates about what it means to be "black", "African", "Caribbean", female and feminist, I renegotiate the ambiguities and contradictions of my evolving identity as a black British woman of Barbadian descent.

Patricia Hill Collins' standpoint argument (1990), that feminist knowledge generates collective consciousness that transforms socio-economic and political relations among African-American women, has had an important impact on my teaching and research. Black British feminist thought also interrogates the historical and cultural commonalities, as well as the diversity, among women of African descent. Grounded in the development of agendas for liberation, black British feminism examines the intersection of power relations in black women's lives. Collins states that:

Afrocentric feminist thought offers two significant contributions toward furthering our understanding of the important connections among knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. First, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance.

Second, Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological debates in feminist theory and in the sociology of knowledge concerning ways of assessing "truth". Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering. But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications (1990: 222).

Collins contends that black women's subjectivities defy negative self-perceptions, and that this has the potential to change power inequalities. She maintains that black feminism constitutes political activism that resists the oppression of black women by negative, Eurocentric, bourgeois and patriarchal ideologies. Collins maintains that black feminist standpoints share four main criteria. The first is based on the understanding that shared subordination and concrete experience is the foundation of wisdom and well-being. The second principle is based on a holistic perspective that encompasses dialogue about black women's subjectivity. Thirdly, the ethic of caring for local communities involves personal expressiveness, empathy, unification and sharing of mutual interests. The final criterion of personal accountability refers to black women's responsibility for claiming knowledge, ethics, personal empowerment and societal transformation.

According to Collins, black women occupy an "outsider within status" in the academy that allows them to recognise injustices that those who are part of the dominant culture are unable to comprehend. The widespread repudiation of black women's knowledge and lives leads to significant radical insight. Black feminists have the advantage of a unique feminist standpoint to examine black women's contradictory experiences of dealing with dominant social structures. Marginalised scholarly black women creatively use the "insider outsider" approach to research the familiar world from the perspective of the unfamiliar.

My "outsider within status" is characterised by my experiences of racial and sexual discrimination as a student, researcher and lecturer in British universities. Institutionalised racism, sexism, heterosexism and elitism underpin the segregation of black women within the British educational system. It took me many years of lecturing to create effective coping mechanisms to confront exclusion and ensure that my black students faced fewer obstacles than I did. As a black woman in British academia, I opposed alienation and oppression with the support of black feminist intellectuals. Lecturing in Britain, I criticised conventional teaching of sociology, gender and race relations courses, which

failed to probe satisfactorily the interconnections between different forms of subordination. I often queried my ability to educate white students to really understand and challenge the variety of ways in which they benefitted from their racial position of privilege. Nonetheless, I encouraged these students to debunk notions about the superiority of white identity, Euro-American cultures, Western prestige and morality. Despite my misgivings about the implementation of constructive equal opportunities policies, I was able to ensure that the distinct knowledge, shared experiences and demands of black people were also central to my curricula.

Amina Mama (1989) addresses the ways in which black women deal with their dual status as researchers in the Western academy and as members of communities that are subordinated by racism. Sharing common experiences of marginalisation by white societies with other black people is often in conflict with their roles as researchers trained by a Eurocentric educational system. This is complicated by the problems of trying to both step out of, as well as draw on, their personal understanding of the exploitation of black communities. There is tension between researchers' ethnocentric training, which encourages academics to disassociate themselves from black female subjectivity, and their experiences of socio-economic and political inequalities. Such contradictions are often resolved by developing holistic, historical and community-oriented approaches that challenge dominant ideas and give credibility to issues that are defined by black women.

While doing a Masters degree in the interdisciplinary arena of Women's Studies, I conducted research on 17 black women's organisations in Britain. I wanted to examine my training in Western models of sociology, women's studies and race relations in order to prioritise the ideas of black women. Although I was cognisant of academic interpretations of black feminist thought, I believed that it was important to determine the extent to which these reflected the aims of grassroots mobilisation. Interviewing women who worked in black women's groups, I discovered their varying perceptions of the meanings of the term "black". For some, being black was viewed in relation to being of African descent. Others defined blackness politically by considering similar historical struggles against racial subjugation. It became apparent in debates over the relevance of feminism that many black women regarded it as a racist ideology, even though the strategies of their organisations demonstrated feminist principles. Several women maintained that this confusion about the merits of feminism arose because it was viewed as inherently racist. This misconception

frequently precluded black women from identifying with feminist ideology even while adopting feminist methods. Despite different opinions about how to categorise these groups by virtue of their racial and gender politics, it was obvious that they were providing vital socio-economic and political services that the majority of black women would not be able to gain access to elsewhere. These investigations allowed me to connect black feminist theories and action by improving my knowledge of the different interpretations of black identities, feminist politics and the activism of women's organisations.

I was aware that in general, these groups did not prioritise sexuality as a critical issue, in view of wider community struggles. This silence around the issue of sexuality motivated my doctoral investigation; I conducted research on the historical and social construction of black female sexuality in England in order to ascertain the significance of derogatory representations of hypersexuality. In particular, I interrogated the effects of representations of black women as lascivious, prone to prostitution and rampant breeders on the self-concepts and relationships of 21 interviewees. Participants explained that they created self-definitions that enabled them to retaliate against their depiction as sensuous, bestial and Sapphires. bell hooks asserts that the Sapphire stereotype represents black women as evil, manipulative and predatory sexual temptresses (1982). Respondents maintained that they were able to transcend such lewd and reductive portrayals by constructing positive self-images and alternative models of sexual freedom. They articulated the need to combine agency, independence and self-love within the context of broader structural changes.

I adapted Western social scientific research methods, mainstream feminist methodology and black feminist frameworks to examine the concerns of my interviewees. Black feminists create historical and analytical frameworks that transcend the limitations of Western models and concepts, which limit our potential to examine our own positions. The emphasis on action-oriented research strategies within black feminism is beneficial to implementing public policies that meet the varied and complex needs of our black communities. I was able to ascertain interviewees' challenges to stereotypes, as well as the degree to which they rejected male control of their sexuality and enhanced their own erotic empowerment.

Institutionalised racism and sexism restricts the access of black female scholars to tenured academic posts and promotion. The marginalisation, under-employment and unemployment of black female academics often constricts their ability to achieve their potential. Research funding councils often contribute to

racial inequity in the academy by failing to develop greater representation of black female intellectuals. Frequently sited in the lowest echelons of academic hierarchies, black female lecturers and researchers struggle to reconcile the pressures of publishing, teaching and research within the constraints of unequal opportunity structures. The absence of a critical mass of black women in British academia makes it extremely difficult to negate racist paradigms, with white scholars unable to appreciate the situated knowledge of black female academics. Moreover, the dominance and monopoly of anti-racist studies by white intellectuals means that black women's ideas as well as their resources, are frequently stolen. It is difficult for subordinated black female academics to prevent senior lecturers and professors from benefiting from their research, leading to the compromise of their rights of authorship or even wholesale academic theft. For instance, black women who have conducted research with the assurance of authorship of papers often discover that their names are not listed on the final report. Instead white and largely male researchers are awarded the bulk of the funding, and are cited as authors even though their input into the research process might have been minimal.

Structural barriers to career advancement and the conservative environment in the academy lead many black scholars in Britain to migrate to countries that offer better opportunities to pursue their goals. Faced with the additional challenge of racialised sexual discrimination, increasing numbers of black female scholars abandon their homes in Britain to seek employment in the United States of America, Canada, Africa and the Caribbean. After years of temporary lecturing and research posts, and frustrated by the constraints to my personal and academic progress, I decided to leave Britain and applied for lectureships in Africa and the Caribbean. I wanted to stop lecturing in the British educational system because I felt unable to address effectively the ways in which it undermines, silences and ignores black people and their histories, politics and cultures. In 2004, I accepted a lectureship in Jamaica at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies, hoping that I would have greater influence there than in Britain, as well as access to greater opportunities for lecturing, research and outreach work.

I have found that my journey of self-awareness, discovery and acceptance in Jamaica is influenced yet again by my new "outsider within" position here. Certainly I am not fighting against the same racial and gender biases as I was in Britain, but the need to recreate survival mechanisms to overcome isolation is still paramount. My continued self-actualisation has been limited by lack of

adequate mentoring, guidance and support. I intend to find out more about local women's groups in Jamaica, just as I did in Britain, when I stepped out of the ivory tower and conducted interviews with black women's organisations there. By linking my experiences as a lecturer to a deeper understanding of Jamaican feminism, I believe I can contribute to progressive dialogue that reconciles a rich diversity of complex female identities. I hope to support and work towards advancing the priorities of Jamaican women beyond the confines of lecture theatres.

Jamaica is plagued by different divisions (on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, disability, age and marital status) to those I encountered in Britain, but they are still pervasive. For instance, in Britain, a white male student told me that he "did not mind being taught by a nigger". To him, all black people were racially inferior, and he felt quite liberal in asserting that he was not opposed to being taught by one. Feeling that I had left such racism behind it was a shock, when I arrived for my interview at Mona, to be asked by a black male professor why, as "an English Bajan nigger", I wanted the post. The implication was that by virtue of residing in Britain and having Barbadian parents, I was inferior to him, a Jamaican. I mention this incident because many Jamaicans erroneously claim that racial divisions do not exist in their society.

Linnette Vassell (2004) maintains that since the 1980s, the political connections among exploited groups have not been truly appreciated by Caribbean feminists. The decline in women's organisations and the increase in professionalism contribute to problems in gaining and maintaining equality for poor women. Vassell examines the rivalry and favouritism that prohibit radical thought and progress. She argues that new gender sensitive programmes dedicated to "lifting as we climb" are essential. Vassell states:

We have to get our own house, our own organisations and movements in order against the bad-minded competitiveness, the long-run malice-keeping, the 'judgementalism', the gate-keeping that lets in our friends and keeps out others ... (2004: 702).

In our endeavours to fight against male domination, we often have difficulties with acknowledging the ways in which we are in positions of status and authority over other women. Audre Lorde (1984) argues that patriarchal ideologies and practices can not be used to liberate women. Academic feminists who use masculinist methods have to leave "the master's house" if gender equality is to be achieved. When we reject patriarchal power and privilege

to overcome our fear of difference, the advancement of self-discovery and recovery will transform gender relations. Lorde proclaims:

... For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (1984: 112).

I would like to increase my awareness of the ways in which African and diasporic feminists can unite and mobilise to implement social changes for black women. I want to extend my initial analysis of African women's groups in Britain to assess the similarities and differences of feminist activism in Africa and the Caribbean. Although I understand that I would still be an "outsider within", I believe that I have learnt from my experiences in British and Caribbean academia in ways that will enable me to embark on this important enterprise. This will allow me to build upon my commitment to liberating politics that empower black women to regain control of all areas of their lives.

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Fashioning women for a brave new world: gender, ethnicity and literary representation

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This essay adds to the ongoing dialogue on the literary representation of Caribbean women. It grapples with a range of issues: how has iconic literary representation of the Caribbean woman altered from the inception of Caribbean women's writing to the present? Given that literary representation was a tool for inscribing otherness and a counter-discursive device for recuperating the self from the imprisoning gaze, how do the politics of identity, ethnicity and representation play out over time? How does representation shift when one considers the gender and ethnicity of the protagonist in relation to that of the writer? Can we assume that self-representation is necessarily the most "authentic"? And how has the configuration of the representative West Indian writer changed since the 1970s to the present?

The problematics of literary representation have been with us since Plato and Aristotle wrestled with the purpose of fiction and the role of the artist in the ideal republic. Its problematics were foregrounded in feminist dialogues on the power of the male gaze to objectify and subordinate women. These problematics were also central to so-called third-world and post-colonial critics concerned with the correlation between imperialism and the projection/internalisation of the gaze which represented the subaltern as sub-human. Representation has always been a pivotal issue in female-authored Caribbean literature, with its nagging preoccupation with identity formation, which must be read through myriad shifting filters of gender and ethnicity.

Under any circumstance, representation remains a vexing theoretical issue. W. J. T. Mitchell alludes to three forms of representational relationships identified by semioticians – icon, symbol and index. Mimesis and imitation are *iconic* forms of representation that transcend differences between media. For instance, an avocado may represent a woman. *Symbolic* forms of representation are arbitrary and based on convention. Language, for example, is based on a system of signs to which we arbitrarily assign meaning. We need to agree

(or increasingly, in this postmodern era, to disagree) on the correlation between the sign and meaning. And *indexical* representation signals a relationship between the sign and the reality, based on linkages such as cause and effect and proximity. Add to these representational complexities the notion that a single individual may represent the group; the political issue of who is best qualified to represent who to whom; and the related concern – for whom should we shape our representations? Speaking to the foundational relationship between representation, aesthetics, semiotics and poetics, Mitchell states:

One obvious question that comes up in contemporary theories of representation, consequently, is the relationship between aesthetic or semiotic representation (things that stand for other things) and political representation (persons who act for other people) (1990: 12).

From the inception of their fictional expression, these issues have been pivotal for Caribbean women writers. In analysing these problematics of representation, O'Callaghan (2004) includes in the categorisation of women writing the West Indies, British women born in and or resident in the West Indies, whose early writings presented facets of West Indian culture and social relations which resonate with contemporary readers. The first known woman to represent the West Indies was Aphra Behn, whose shadowy bibliographical history locates her as born in England in 1640, but domiciled in Surinam for a period. Based on her experiences in the Indies, Behn, who is lauded as the first woman to make a living by writing fiction, authored a slave narrative, *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave*, in 1678. Significantly, she is mentioned in *A Room of One's Own* in Virginia Woolf's listing of the literary foremothers who wrote prior to the eighteenth century and gave shape and focus to women's writing. This locates the contribution of women writing the West Indies within the tradition of the global women's movement, as well as within the tradition of slave narratives. Both traditions produced literary expressions penned by individuals representing a besieged collectivity, as counter-discursive to false representation – enacting resistance to oppressive structures, through the power of the word.

The most significant early Caribbean female voice, that of Dominican-born Jean Rhys (1890–1979), generated troubling representational issues. Her writing raised pertinent questions about the basis on which we identify a literary piece as West Indian. And by extension, what criteria should we use to represent a novelist as West Indian? Authored by a member of the planter class, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) emphasised the complexity introduced by the interface of gender with race, class, colour and social oppression. Given the

correlation between appropriation of power to tell one's own story, and the inscription of counter-discursives to denigrating narratives and stereotypes, Rhys' representational politics proved to be provocative because of her unapologetic appropriation of the tropes of enslavement and the middle passage for her fictional exploration of white women under siege. Ironically, it was the first significant fictional voice emanating from the planter class that announced preoccupations that have since become endemic for Caribbean writers throughout the diaspora. Rhys maps the spatial frame and the psychic discomfort of the writer with a vision of dislocation – a Caribbean homeland as paradise lost, ghostlike wanderings through adopted lands which can never become home, writing that proceeds out of a liminal, transitional space, one that is psychically uneasy but creatively fertile. As I have argued elsewhere, it is from the planter class and a white woman writer that we get the clearest early evocation of what Caribbean Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott has since termed "homecomings without home".¹

To date, the female voices that most commonly represent Caribbean women's writing are the post-1970 voices of black/Afrocentric women writers, including Merle Hodge, Erna Brodber, Olive Senior, Jamaica Kincaid. Helen Pyne-Timothy, identifying the modern feminist movement as a catalyst which summoned these writers into voice argues:

... despite the hegemonic hierarchy of values which would valorize the white and "high brown" woman above the East Indian and African descended woman, the black woman has been to date the most willing to articulate her unique vision of the world and to reveal the synergy that controls the interlocking relationship between individual and community (1998: 140).

The primary agenda of the period was to re-construct and valorise that which had been represented as unlovely, impure and insignificant. Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970) represents one of the earliest attempts on the part of Afro-Caribbean women at self-representation. On behalf of the collectivity, she determined to write our own stories – to transfix onto the written page our role models and developmental paths. Concerned with reversing the process of denigration, disfigurement, self-contempt and erasure, Hodge's agenda has been to validate and authenticate a people by inscribing their mode of being in fiction. Stuart Hall describes such a process as generating "an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented

and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed” (1990: 394). Her representation of mothering, in particular, is significant for this discussion.

In *Crick Crack Monkey*, Hodge writes with much nostalgia of the warmth and vitality of the Afro-centric rural working class – its intimacies, its network of supportive relationships, its adversities and its survival tactics. This is the formative environment for the powerful mothering women of the Caribbean. Hodge’s characters make a living from agriculture and small-scale marketing (Ma), or by depending on a series of male partners (Tantie). In contrast to the affirmation of these larger-than-life characters, Hodge treats the failure of the imperial mother/land harshly. The failure of the system to nurture and impart life and sustenance to a people is captured in the faded portrait of the white ancestress – the quintessential borrowed image of Olive Senior’s poem, “Colonial Girl’s School”. Metonymically frozen into a disapproving gaze, like the imperial order, the portrait is fading into antiquity, but resolutely frowning on generations of errant children because they do not reflect her departing glory. Hodge valorises instead the maternal ancestress, the African great-grandmother. In keeping with African cosmology, the individual belongs to the nurturing community comprising the unborn, the living and the dead. The great-grandmother has long since migrated to the land of the undead, but remains able to impart identity to successive generations through the power of naming. This has the potential to erase the denigrating speaking of the European external structure, but the transference is under threat due to a collective amnesia, induced by the horror of the New World experience.

Hodge is representative of the emergent Afrocentric Caribbean female writers of the 1970s, who, in the battle against erasure and in response to the imperative need to recover so-called “reluctant matriarchs”, asserted the visibility and vocality of a powerful matrilineage rooted in a distinctly Caribbean-Afrocentrism rather than Africa. Hodge’s representation of the Caribbean mother/woman is fundamentally an idealised, near-deified (though often contradictory) portrayal of foremothers – a literary genuflection that honours the amazing survival strategies exerted by lower-strata Afro-Caribbean mothers. Similar quests and representations resonate throughout the African diaspora, as literary daughters such as Alice Walker and Paule Marshall find themselves “in search of their mother’s gardens”.² Such representations are associated with the exalted philosophical position of mothers in traditional African society. Yet this literary phenomenon is a distinctly New World creation, related to the nationalist

quest for a Caribbean motherland to honour, within which to root and sprout a Caribbean female subjectivity. The excavation/recovery/recuperation/ inscription of a matrilineage ensures, in turn, the inheritance of a “true true name” for the literary daughters. However, as revealed by Jean King’s “Sad Mother Ballad”, self-representation of mothering is not always this generous and idealistic.

As vigorous, validating and necessary as the evocation of Afro-Caribbean mothering was for the post-independence period of nation-building, a different dynamic has been manifesting itself in the most recent wave of Caribbean women’s literature. The newest arrivals on the Caribbean literary scene have been the Indo-Caribbean woman writers. Predictably, their expression of voice had been constrained by late access to education, along with predisposition to early marriage and childbearing. The Indian woman was the icon of “pure” ethnic identity and bearer of the requirement to maintain a smooth, coherent communal face, thereby protecting the purity of a people under siege.

Indo-Caribbean writers are embracing vastly different ideological objectives and representational politics. Lakshmi Persaud has authored four novels to date. Her earliest novels, *Butterfly in the Wind* and *Sastra*, deal with acculturation and migrations. They locate the voice and subjectivity of her protagonists securely within a revitalised Hinduism, as a gracious oasis and shield against the chaotic disorder of the dominant and adversarial black-dominated Creole society in Trinidad. Janice Shineborne rejects an enforced creolisation, opting instead for reclamation/recuperation of “coolie” identity,³ while Ramabai Espinet defines the ambivalent position of the East Indian woman in relation to Creole society (“Barred”), and crafts “Indian Robber Talk”, claiming a syncretic creativity to be afforded by access to the entire West Indian cultural heritage.

I focus here on what the work of Shani Mootoo brings to the hotly contested representational issue in terms of ethnic and sexual representation. Mootoo, a visual artist, filmmaker, Indo-Trinidadian, Irish-born Canadian-resident lesbian writes politicised, transgressive fiction with the intention of slaying as many sacred cows as possible with her superbly crafted weaponry. Mootoo “planasses”⁴ the iconographical representations of femininity and masculinity, including breaking the taboo on explicit representations of lesbian sex acts within Caribbean literature. She indulges in a bewildering postmodern imaging and play of subjectivities. In “Out on Main Street”, for instance, Mootoo sets up a range of contradictory discourses to explore the relationships between individuals, genders, ethnicities and migrants, and how these interface with cultural artefacts such as language, food and dress.

The first-person narrative voice, again speaking on behalf of the collectivity, frames a multiplicity of potential responses to the central question of “Who are we?” In terms of ancestral belonging, her first-person narrator confesses, “We ain’t good grade A Indians”; and in relation to New World acculturation, the declaration is “We is kitchen Indians”. Mootoo likewise refuses to allow her character any fixed gender identity. Instead, she sketches as her first-person narrator, central character and mediator of the fictional universe, a butch lesbian who vacillates between an unfemme, strong-man “monkey” stance (who is jealous when men eye her excessively femme lover), and a femme “jiggly-wiggly” identity, geared to attract the same men – on the grounds that they overlook her as if she was “a gender they forget to classify” (1993: 48). Mootoo takes a shot here at the manner in which gender orientation disciplines the body into postures that perform hyper-masculinity – the strong-man “monkey” stance suggestive of excessive muscle and body mass, and hyper-femininity – “jiggle-wiggly” movements suggestive of excessive curvaceousness. In both cases, performance and excess are evident.

Clearly Mootoo sets out to undermine what Judith Butler terms the culturally determined grid of heterosexuality. The gender identities that she presents may be transgressive, but they are also extremely polarised, recreating a reversal of the terms of discourse, structural inequities, poses and patterns of oppressive maleness and female interaction. The text plays with static role reversal. The narrator puts on and takes off femme and unfemme mannerisms like a cloak. She apes the jealous husband who “owns” the sexuality of his partner by trying to restrict her partner Janet’s wardrobe, based on the level of male attention she attracts. And as is the case in the stereotype of oppressive male-female relationships, Janet responds verbally with quarrelling and nagging.

Beneath the ironic humour is a re-creation/make-believe reversal of male-female inequities that feminists have long sought to demolish. Is Mootoo deconstructing the assumption that female/female liaisons are free of the tired, unproductive, gendered, power-based games couples play? Perhaps, but I believe there is more to it.

Mootoo buys into the postmodern play of identities, signs and subjectivities with a vengeance. She represents identity as an infinite play of representations, ceaselessly duplicated until the signs themselves mask the absence of basic reality at the core. So her artistry does not answer to an impulse to represent reality through fiction. Rather, it becomes what Baudrillard (1998) identifies as an impulse to create fictional simulations; to generate ever-proliferating identities

that demonstrate the impossibility of ever arriving at conclusive meaning. In other words, Mootoo's characters will never be able to answer decisively the question "Who am I?" Instead, the writer produces a highly self-conscious, fictive labyrinth, a hyper-representation that preserves the fiction of identity formation. This in turn serves to defer the psychically intolerable admission that referentiality and meaning have ceased to exist. It is too early to determine the extent to which Mootoo's bold experimentation will create a paradigm for or become representative of yet another wave of Caribbean fiction.

From the inception of Caribbean women's writing to the present, female authors have functioned as visionaries, ceaselessly pushing back the boundaries to create new paradigms for gender representation. Their fictions testify to pervasive underlying assumptions in relation to community. Gender has created commonality between women writers and readers. In each period, we see indicators of women writing to, about and for women. Yet the diverse ethnic and socio-cultural configurations of the Caribbean dictate that women also (and in some cases, primarily) write out of ethnic and cultural communities, writing the ambiguous politics of racialised identity and belonging into their fictions. Persaud's creations, for example, demonstrate that gender has not always been sufficient to override the othering generated by ethnic dissociation.⁵ Note also that successive waves of secondary migrations have served to strengthen rather than weaken the process of identity formation based on ethnicity. This is not to imply that Caribbean women writers write unproblematically out of subject locations based on ethnicity. In the case of Rhys, for instance, the white Creole subject location has been contradictory and problematic, but most of all, it has been prototypically West Indian.

What can be said about the evocation of place? Afro-Caribbean women writers from the 1970s, responding to the urgent need to restore the personhood of the African subject, set out to redress the hatred and denigration of racism, in terms which laid claim to West Indian selfhood, landscape and social reality in positive terms. Their representational constructs privileged a Caribbean style of adaptive Afrocentric matrilineage, which was interpellated as crucial for connection to the Caribbean landscape and for forging an authentic, rooted, nationalistic social order. On the other hand, the Indo-Caribbean voices emerging in the 1990s have echoed the prototypical exilic condition of Caribbean writers, even when they strongly affirm ethnic belonging. Significantly, these writers write home into the Caribbean socio-cultural landscape, grappling to define Caribbean identity while simultaneously testing the limits and potentialities

for integration into largely unaccommodating metropolitan host cultures. Much ink has been spilt over issues of homelessness, nostalgia, the centrality of the natal place, the creative schizophrenia and aesthetic fertility of the exilic condition. These issues have resonated in the work of numerous canonised male and female West Indian writers.

The most recent wave of writing demonstrates that female identity based on belonging to place is losing ground, although identity formation rooted in nostalgia in relation to a lost homeland is not. The Caribbean landscape is hauntingly inscribed as home again and again, including by persons of Caribbean parentage who interpellate themselves as Caribbean writers. Always crafting new literary icons, women writers are now traversing new transnational, transgendered, transgressive terrains (Dionne Brand and Patricia Powell also fall into this category) in which gender constructions do not sit easily with traditional ethnic identity formations. In the case of Mootoo, her gendered positioning as lesbian overrides her ethnic positioning. Yet she writes frankly and powerfully of a highly eroticised homoerotic domain, which carefully recreates all of the tired strictures of male-female inequity.

At each stage, the women writers mentioned here fashion iconic representations of women for brave new worlds. Yet, in relation to the womanist objectives of crafting liberatory spaces for and valorising representations of women, the latest icons seem to suggest that the more things change, the more they remain the same. What, then, is the prognosis for the future? The clearest indicator is the need to explore women's lives through critical approaches that balance the variables of race, class and gender in mutually interrogative relation.

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Footnotes

- 1 This argument is outlined in my essay entitled "Homecoming without Home: An Intertextual Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *No Telephone to Heaven*".
- 2 Yet the search and its outcomes extend beyond simple idealisation. For example, Alice Walker went to the extent of presenting herself as the relative of Zora Neale Hurston as she pursued the [her]story of this rebellious female precursor, erected

a monument to mark her humble grave, and published a narrative in her honour, thereby restoring her as a foremost literary foremother.

- 3 The term “coolie” has been used in the Caribbean and elsewhere as a derogatory reference to persons of Indian descent. In much the same way that terms such as “queer” and “black” have been recuperated and deployed for purposes of self-representation and affirmation, Indo-Caribbean female writers are selectively recovering and embracing the term “coolie”.
- 4 The term “planass” means to hit with the flat blade of a cutlass.
- 5 For a fuller discussion of this contention, see my essay “East/West/Indian/Woman/Other: At the Crossroads of Gender and Ethnicity”.

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A tribute to Coretta Scott King: 1927–2006

Simidele Dosekun



Coretta Scott King, the African-American civil rights activist, passed away on 30 January 2006. Coretta was the wife of the late Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. She became famous around the world as the woman who marched by his side and as the widow who fought to keep his ideals alive after his assassination in 1968. But Coretta was also a social activist and idealist in her own right before and during her marriage to Dr King, and after she was widowed at the early age of 40. Born in 1927 in Alabama, in the deeply segregated American South, Coretta experienced poverty and racial discrimination as a child. Out of this grew a strong commitment to social justice and racial equality. She dedicated her life to the struggle for the freedom of black people at home in the United States and abroad. She also campaigned for the rights of women and children, workers, and gay and lesbian people, among other causes.

Coretta's active involvement in black politics began during her college years. She graduated valedictorian, top of her high-school class in Alabama, and was awarded a scholarship to attend Antioch College in Ohio in 1945, enrolling as one of its few black students two years after her older sister, Edythe, had entered as the first fully sponsored student of colour. Coretta was intellectually stimulated and challenged at Antioch and generally found her fellow students welcoming. Nevertheless, she was sometimes frustrated by their ignorance and assumptions about black people, and by their contradictory perceptions that she was somehow "different" from other blacks, yet at the same time a representative of her race to whom all questions about "her people" could be posed. She became active in the Antioch chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and also served as a member of the college's Race Relations and Civil Liberties Committee.

Such engagement was further spurred by an incident of overt discrimination that reminded Coretta of the degree to which racism structured American society, configuring access and opportunity as much in the seemingly progressive North as in her native South. She was required, as part of her studies, to teach for

a year in a public elementary school, but the school board would not permit this. The student body of the school in question was racially integrated, but the teachers were still all white; Coretta's presence among them would have upset the status quo. Disappointed, Coretta nonetheless grasped that because she was black, she would always have to actively struggle against racism. Moreover, she realised that this struggle or indeed *duty* to struggle could not be just for herself, for her personal aims or advancement, but for all people like her. Later, she was to describe this moment in her autobiography:

I am going to be black the rest of my life, and I have to face these problems [of discrimination]. So I'm not going to let this one get me down. I'll have to accept a compromise now, but I don't accept it as being right. I am going ahead in a more determined way than ever, to do something about this situation. I don't want those who come after me to have to experience the same fate as I did (1993: 41–42).

Thus, even more committed to her beliefs, Coretta left Antioch College in 1951 with a Bachelor of Arts in Music and Education and moved to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, to pursue a further degree in concert singing. In 1952, she was introduced to Martin Luther King, Jr, who was studying for a doctorate in theology at Boston University at the time. It was not, according to her description, love at first sight, but she soon came to appreciate that he was a man with whom she deeply shared many ideas and ideals. He acknowledged as much about Coretta in 1967, with the words: "I wish I could say, to satisfy my masculine ego, that I led her down this path [of struggle against racism]. But I must say we went down together, because she was as actively involved and concerned when we met as she is now" (cited in Applebome, 2006). Or, as Coretta was to assert in a 1978 interview: "I didn't learn my commitment from Martin. We just converged at a certain time" (cited in Trescott, 1978).

The two were married in June 1953, after which they moved back South in 1954 to Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin assumed the duties of pastor and Coretta those of "pastor's wife" at a local Baptist church. Their first child, Yolanda Denise, was born shortly thereafter, in 1955. Family life was soon deeply and irrevocably entangled with dramatic political developments in Alabama. In December 1955, a black seamstress, Rosa Parks, made history by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a racially-segregated municipal bus. Her subsequent arrest triggered the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by Martin and strategised from the Kings' home. During the

boycotts, the black community of Montgomery refused to use city buses, and marched and engaged in non-violent acts of protest against racial segregation and discrimination. These actions resulted in the 1956 desegregation of public transport in Alabama by the US Supreme Court. This success catapulted Martin to the forefront of the civil rights struggle. Increasingly, he travelled around the country to speak and lead marches and political gatherings. Coretta accompanied him when family and other duties permitted.

Yet Coretta found it frustrating that she could not be as active in the struggle, in her own right, as she would have liked. Whatever Martin's public comments on his "masculine ego" and gender politics, such as those cited above, Coretta explained that her husband "in many ways had very traditional ideas about women ... He'd say, 'I have no choice, I have to do this, but you haven't been called.' And I said: 'Can't you understand? You know I have an urge to serve just like you have'" (cited in Applebome, 2006). There was thus a certain tension between them concerning how public and active Coretta could or even should be for the cause, as a woman and as Martin's wife. History shows that it was Martin's ideas and notions of familial responsibilities – by 1963, the couple had four children – that ultimately prevailed, limiting the visibility and extent of Coretta's activism relative to her husband.

This is of course not to say that Coretta would necessarily have matched Martin's engagement and leadership if circumstances had permitted her to try. Rather, the point is that in becoming Mrs Martin Luther King, Jr – the wife of a charismatic and high-profile leader and the mother of four – Coretta was obliged to sacrifice a significant degree of her independence of idealism and activism. She could not be on the front lines as often as she wanted; she could neither take nor be granted full ownership of her efforts and engagements for the black cause. Instead, *her* ideas and work were publicly represented as an extension of or complement to her husband's. Publicly she was defined – and defined herself too, it must be noted – as "the wife of Dr King", whether dutifully marching in protest and solidarity by *his* side, speaking in public on *his* behalf, or managing home and hearth when *his* commitments took him away from his family.

Nonetheless, despite the limitations placed on her identity and activism, Coretta did undertake certain independent initiatives in the service of the cause she held dear. On the first anniversary of the Montgomery boycotts in 1956, she joined a group of colleagues to perform in a concert in New York City to raise funds for the boycott movement, the Montgomery Improvement Association

(MIA). She sang some classical pieces, but her innovative idea for the concert was to perform the story of Montgomery and of the Movement for her audience with words and music, interspersing narrative with old Negro spirituals and new freedom songs. This piece was entitled “Portrait of the Montgomery Bus Protest.” Coretta later revisited this concept and developed it further. She decided in 1964 to give a series of “Freedom Concerts”, again using music, prose, poetry and narration to recite the story of the civil rights movement. She described this as “an inspired concept seeking to combine, in dramatic form, art and experience in a practical, relevant, meaningful way” (Scott King, 1993: 230). The idea was to use her musical talent and training to promote the racial equality and understanding to which she was committed, thus combining her two great passions. She performed over 30 concerts to audiences in major cities in the country. The concerts were enthusiastically received, and served not only to raise awareness of the struggle for non-racialism, but also to raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organisation which her husband had formed to fight against all forms of racism and promote non-violence. In her biography, Coretta tells that Martin was at first sceptical about her plans to raise money for the SCLC in this way, but was forced to admit his error after her first show in New York in 1964 brought in over six thousand dollars (1993: 232).

In the 1960s, Coretta became involved in broader causes and actions not directly related to the civil rights movement. She became a sought-after speaker on her own merits, and was invited to make speeches from diverse platforms, including anti-war rallies. She was asked in 1962 by the Women’s Strike for Peace to join the American delegation to the International Disarmament Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, to lobby for a ban on nuclear testing. Coretta also joined the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, convinced that “the women of the world, united without any regard for national or racial divisions, [could] become a most powerful force for international peace” (Scott King 1993: 193). Indeed, recognising that peace and freedom were intricately linked, Coretta was drawn to the anti-Vietnam protest movement at a time when her husband was fully concentrated on the black struggle. She urged him to speak out against American imperialism and aggression in Vietnam; for strategic reasons, he was initially reluctant to do so, but by 1967, he too had come to appreciate the political and moral urgency of the matter, and took his wife’s advice.

When Martin was murdered the next year, Coretta’s immediate public

priority was to sustain his work and legacy. The first thing she did was to lead a march in his place for workers in Memphis, Tennessee, the very city in which he had been assassinated, just four days after his death. “Because his task was not finished,” she explained, “I felt that I must re-dedicate myself to the completion of his work ... [so that] his death would have served the redemptive purpose which he talked about so often” (Scott King 1993: 304). To this end, Coretta went on to found The Martin Luther King, Jr Center for Non-violent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1968. Its mission was (and is) to promote the non-violent ethos her husband lived by, and to advance the causes of social justice and equality he died for. It was the first nationally recognised institution built in honour of an African-American in the US. Coretta also campaigned long and hard to establish her husband’s birthday as a national holiday in the US, so that the history of the oppression of black people and their struggle in that country would always be publicly remembered. This holiday became law in 1986 amidst much political controversy; once again, it was the first time that such a federal honour had been accorded in memory of an African-American citizen.

Coretta spent the rest of her life as a spokeswoman and activist for a broad range of causes. In 1974, she formed the Full Employment Action Council, a coalition of over 100 civil society organisations whose aim was to advocate for progressive national policy on full employment. She mobilised over 800 human rights organisations to form the Coalition of Conscience in 1983, which sponsored the largest-ever march on Washington at the time, demanding jobs, peace and freedom for all. Although these were among her more high-profile activities, Coretta spent the greater proportion of her time and energies in later life promoting her message of peace and equality at a more grassroots level, by meeting and speaking to diverse activist and advocacy groups in the United States – and by publicly naming and speaking out against social injustice whenever and wherever she saw it.

Coretta also took an active interest in international politics. She and her husband had always drawn a link between the black struggle for rights and equality in the US and the struggle for independence in colonial Africa, and felt a moral and cultural kinship with Africans. They first visited Africa in 1957 at the moment of Ghana’s independence from colonial rule, and publicly supported other liberation movements on the continent. In now infamous scenes from 1985, Coretta and three of her children were arrested outside the South African Embassy in Washington DC for gathering to protest against apartheid. The

next year, she travelled to South Africa to gain a better understanding of the situation under apartheid, and to meet Winnie Mandela (then the wife of jailed anti-apartheid icon, Nelson Mandela). On her return home, she continued to put pressure on US President Reagan to sanction the apartheid government. In 1990, Coretta served as the chairperson of the Atlanta Committee which hosted Nelson and Winnie Mandela on their first trip to the US after his release from prison; later, she stood by Nelson Mandela's side as he celebrated victory in the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa. She was recognised at her funeral by Adelaide Tambo, the South African anti-apartheid activist and wife of ANC leader Oliver Tambo, as "an outstanding and honoured fellow combatant for the freedom of black people everywhere and the building of a just world order" (2006).

Despite Coretta's long list of activities and accolades, some critics have argued that in the final analysis, her greatest achievement was to marry Martin – because all that she did came from and referred back to their connection. It is certainly true that Coretta's fame and influence first derived from her position as Martin's wife. It is also true that Coretta spent the decades after her husband's death working in, for and from his name and memory. It is indeed difficult to find public representations of Coretta in which she is not cast primarily in terms of her late husband – as "the wife," "the widow," "the first lady" of the civil rights movement, and so on.

Yet, arguably, the very pervasiveness and persistence of such representations suggest that in order to assess the public life of a woman such as Coretta Scott King, it is necessary to consider how and why a woman's identity may be discursively reduced to that of her husband's, and if she may even be complicit in such a reduction. The constant identification of Coretta in terms of her husband also signals a need to consider what it must have actually *meant* and *taken* for her as an individual to live out this identity publicly, no doubt burdened but honoured by her husband's legacy, limited but empowered by his name. In looking at what Coretta ultimately made of her public identity as the wife and the widow of the most visible leader of the civil rights movement in America, it perhaps becomes clearer where her own legacy and contributions lie. Despite the public pressures placed upon her, despite her personal tragedy, she was a woman who remained constant and active in her commitment to racial equality and social justice around the world.

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A triangular trade in gender and visuality: the making of a cross-cultural image-base

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Acquiring a visual grammar

Visuality has moved the methods of understanding gender from those of theoretical discourses involving psychoanalytic and linguistic deconstruction to challenging our senses and inviting us to learn a visual grammar of gender. In coupling gender with visuality in this respect, I refer to gender as the ongoing construction of masculinities and femininities and the power imbalances between and among men and women as these are made evident through images. If the feminist project is that of the reconstruction of knowledge – making the invisible visible by reconfiguring histories and narratives of the past and present into discourses that are liberating rather than suggestive of victimhood or absence – then the critical use of images might make this happen more quickly. It is not that these discourses have not already begun to move us from victimhood to agency (especially among enlightened academics and many professionals who work directly with various disempowered groups), but we need to accelerate this process so that it reaches a wider audience through means which are more accessible, and which might have more immediate impact, perhaps through a parallel visual discourse rather than only text-based reconstructions.

One might ask the question, “Why has the visual image ‘returned’”? Human beings are visually stimulated from birth onwards. The sight of the mother is the first “knowing” of a child. We learn to be unseen, we are trained or conditioned not to see, we develop mechanisms so that we will not be seen or noticed, effacing ourselves when necessary (a range of occupations require this; for instance, a waiter in a restaurant, who must be seen and yet unseen). These processes are sometimes a necessity, enabling survival. But as a result, we unlearn to trust our eyes and what we know, in favour of scripted words, which with the increasing advent of the “book” and the written text, take on the mantle of greater authority. The reading of images, therefore, calls for a

heightened political consciousness of the material to ensure that we do not replicate past paradigms. We cannot read either image or text blindly.

In the business of communication, language is credited with major power – hence diminishing the value of our visual intelligence. For example, we might be persuaded by the oral presentation of a good speaker or smooth-tongued politician – the relationship between what we hear and what we see is not a settled one. So by considering the area of visibility and challenging our visual intelligence, perhaps we are integrating academic and popular consciousness. What visibility allows is another site for struggle and resistance, empowerment and liberation.

The return of visibility as a means of knowledge creation and dissemination has re-occurred because of the proliferation of images in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; images in the media, on the world wide web, in music videos, and so on. We need to make sense of these images, but as we each bring a different set of baggage to what we view – in the words of Sadan Jha, “each representation register demands its own integral space” (2004) – we must also devise ways of sharing similar or related sets of grammars and lexicons.

There is an additional burden placed on the new methods by which we investigate gender through the visual image. We face the same research dilemmas in new form; the question of how to arrive at more rigorous truths (understanding truth itself to be a slippery customer) – a truth which in the academy is assumed to be “objective”. Arriving at a shared grammar and lexicon requires us to devise what Michelle Rowley refers to as an “ethics of articulation” (2004). This invites us to allocate agency to the subjects we scrutinise rather than further objectifying them. Many of these images are drawn from the “same poisoned wells”¹ that were part of the project of visualising empire (see, for example, Ryan, 1997; Wood, 2000). Even if they were not, the new visualisation of self and other, if it is to add to our insight and compassion, should produce different ways in which we continue to interrogate gender. In the project of visibility/visualisation, it is not clear that the paradigms of visual practice are shared between art practices and the academy. When using visual sources as data, we are faced with many methodological challenges. The most formidable of these is the rigour required in research when attempting to cross or straddle different disciplines.

In this profile, I discuss some of the processes, concerns and contributions of such a project of visualisation as they have been and continue to be constituted around a gender image database entitled *Cultural Crossings*, a collaborative

effort to build a gender database production by two researchers, one based in Atlanta in the US (who has carried out work in West Africa) and the other based in the Caribbean.² Large proportions of the populations of the Caribbean and the United States were originally drawn from the west coast of Africa. The proposed publication of the image-base on the world wide web,³ which will allow researchers and students alike to search and make use of the visual data uncovered by these researchers, provides an new triangular trade. This phrase is used to describe moments in colonial expansionist history, referring in the first instance to the period between the 17th and 19th centuries when slaves were transported by Europeans from Africa to the Americas in what was termed the *middle passage* across the Atlantic. It was called the triangular trade because it was usually made up of three different voyages, which formed a triangular trade pattern. The term “triangular trade” is also used in a related context to a pattern of trade in the 18th century between the West Indies, New England and the west coast of Africa. The commodities involved were principally sugar, rum and slaves. If commodities and human bodies were traded in the past, in this new age of information technology, I suggest that the sharing of images across the US, the Caribbean and Africa creates a triangular trade of another sort, one designed for empowerment rather than exploitation.

Gender and visualisation as a tool for teaching and learning

What do we have to gain by combining the two areas of gender and visibility in scholarship and practice, by juxtaposing two frames of reference, each with their own theoretical and methodological concerns? *Cultural Crossings: A Gender Image-base* attempts to pool collected image-data from an extensive range of sources that include libraries, archives, galleries, and personal site visits to different territories, along with relevant bibliographic references. The rationale for the generation of this database is part of the wider intellectual project that investigates the increasingly “visual” character of modern society. It intervenes to ensure that visual material facilitates classroom learning, enabling the development of a critical visual literacy among students who are persistently bombarded with global messages through media and film. In this new conceptualisation of the triangular trade, we hope the database will assist with regional or ethnic cross-cultural comparisons of the past and present and demonstrate specificities, while allowing those using the data to examine correspondences and differences between peoples and cultures.

The project draws primarily, but not exclusively, on the research of two scholars from the University of the West Indies at Kingston/St. Augustine and Emory University in Atlanta. As a pan-Caribbean scholar, since 1996 I have been systematically collecting historical and contemporary images in and of the wider Caribbean, from an extensive range of sources that include libraries, archives, galleries and personal site visits to different territories. A manuscript entitled *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation*⁴ has been produced, and a documentary film series entitled *A Different Imagination* is also in the making.⁵ The project has collected a large number of images needing to be identified, stored and made accessible to a wide range of users; only a small proportion of these found their way into the book, or the documentary film series, for that matter.

Professor Edna Bay, an historian, has carried out doctoral and post-doctoral research in Benin and West Africa, has worked in the southern US, and has also held a Fulbright fellowship at the University of the West Indies on the Mona Campus in Kingston, Jamaica. As a member of the Association of Caribbean Historians, she is familiar with the resonances of Africa on the Caribbean landscape, and the continuities and discontinuities of various African cultural icons. Bay has also carried out work in the area of iconography and the social history of art forms.

The project germinated as a result of a joint research visit to Haiti by myself and Bay during her Fulbright exchange. Our collaboration enhanced the interpretation of the material on hand, as well as sharpening the possibilities for ongoing exchanges in research, with the obvious impact this would have on teaching. Both of us share an abiding interest in the image as an aesthetic production of culture, imbued with symbolic meanings of identity. We also share a disciplinary interest in women's studies and gender studies, and their capacity to transform scholarship and initiate new ways of seeing peoples and cultures.

The idea was that these images would be pooled in a user-friendly searchable database and be made available on websites, at first to students and scholars of the two universities. Since the value of such a project lies in fostering teaching and research, more contemporary images are constantly being added to create a basis for comparison across both space and time. The database remains open to the creators to add and amend entries, and for users to offer suggestions or submit new entries. The image-base is thus envisaged as an expandable and malleable gender classroom tool that will be used by students and faculty to create presentations, do gender analysis and research, and as a continuing

source of data for student projects. In addition, the use of this tool also aids the development of technological skills, and ensures that we use the visual material not only to develop a critical visual literacy, but to gain familiarity with the current technologies for teaching and learning. Both faculty and students benefit from the latter. The twenty-first century manifestation of globalisation, exemplified by the spiralling use of Internet and computer technologies, challenges students and scholars to adapt to technological innovations.

Presenting the image-base

Apart from displaying the actual images collected, each entry in the database is accompanied by the provenance and relevant descriptions of the image, along with related references for further reading or research. To facilitate its placement on the web, an appropriate format was created using the software File Maker Pro, with care taken to ensure that the descriptions, provenance and search categories selected would embrace a range of images, as well as covering different cultural contexts. For example, each of the categories used, of which more than one may be applied, allows the searcher to access a range of images defined according to these categories. The keywords considered for each record are Arts, Body adornment, Children, Education, Family life, Feminism, Health, Forced labour, Leader/Official, Leisure, Man, Religion, Sexuality, Travel/Tourism, War, Woman and finally Work. Procedures for browsing records and the search interface include the use of keywords, but users can also browse according to a file number, a category or any combination of words, as well as numbers such as dates, as long as they are comma-separated.



For example, the data entry shown in Figure 1 is a sketch by Isaac Mendes Belisario, a Jamaican-born painter, published in 1837.

Figure 1: Queen Maam of the Set Girls
(Courtesy of National Gallery of Jamaica)

The entry for this image provides details about the image, including its creator, publication or production data, and it is cross-classified by several keyword entries, among them *woman*, *feminism*, *leisure*, *body adornment* and *sexuality*. The following description, excerpted from a relevant source, is included in the entry:

This woman acted as a conductress of a lively and graceful band of female dancers, denominated Set Girls, in the Jonkunnu celebrations held during the Christmas holidays. As their queen, she is invested with absolute authority which she exercises with unsparing severity, as may be inferred by the Cow-skin whip borne in her hand. She is adorned with blue ribbon bows of imposing dimensions, and feathers tipped with the same colour. The ornaments displayed are probably the loan of her mistress.

In addition, the following entries are provided for further reading or reference on the image. These range from historical sources to contemporary references:

1. Isaac Belisario, "Sketches of Character: An illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica" (Jamaica: Belisario, 1837) No 1;
2. Michael Scott, "Tom Cringle's Log" (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1833);
3. Natasha Barnes, "Body Talk: Notes on Women and Spectacle in Contemporary Trinidad Carnival" in *Small Axe* 7, March 2000;
4. Pamela Franco, "The 'Unruly Woman' in Nineteenth-Century Trinidad Carnival" in *Small Axe* 7, March 2000.

The database contains many others from this series of sketches executed by Isaac Mendes Belisario in the early nineteenth century, and together they provide a body of material which is useful in envisaging the conditions of work, life and leisure of the class of people he illustrated. If these are compared to similar sketches found for populations elsewhere, parallels might establish similarities in the processes which have shaped society and gender relations in different parts of the world. While not all the images are comparable, given the variety of sources, they enable us to build up a visual picture of the creativity and lives of the women who predated us. For instance, Figure 2, one of the images provided by Edna Bay for West Africa, is an art object produced by women in the nineteenth century.



Figure 2: Appliqué cloth dating to the nineteenth century that shows women soldiers of the army of Dahomey capturing enemies and fighting a lion (cloth owned by the Musée de l'Homme in Paris)

Contemporary images comprise a good proportion of the database, dealing with gender in its multi-dimensional sense of masculinity and femininity, work relations, sexuality and so on. Another example is shown here.



Figure 3: Young women at the Regional Consultation on the National Gender Policy for Trinidad and Tobago (Photo courtesy of Patricia Mohammed)

The description that accompanies Figure 3 is as follows:

The photo captures a group of young women from the East/West Corridor in Trinidad as they participated in a regional consultation for the National Gender Policy and Action Plan in 2003. Many of the women were engaged in farming and geriatric care. Some of the issues for discussion included unemployment, health-care, transportation, housing and domestic violence. The consultation raised as its core subject the problems of gender inequity and inequality that still persisted in the society and required that participants outline their concerns as well as solutions.

This image appears in searches using the keywords *Woman and Work, Education and Feminism*. Likewise, Figure 4 (below) will appear in a search of the categories *Woman and Work*, as well as the date of the image. Figure 5 will appear in a search of *Man, Leisure, Body adornment and Sexuality*, cross-classified by the time period in which the image was generated. Other search categories comprise the medium of the image, and its originating country or region. For instance, one can narrow a search by limiting the categories to those that show only photographs of the twentieth century, or paintings and sketches of the eighteenth century.



Figure 4: Woman selling fritters in Benin (Photo courtesy of Edna Bay)



Figure 5: Young men on the streets of Chaguanas, Trinidad
(Photo courtesy of Patricia Mohammed)

On entering the site, the user is introduced to the range of rules and guidelines that help to make the database user-friendly. Students and teachers are free to use the images for research projects and educational purposes, but the images themselves are presented in online resolution so that hard-copy publishing resolution requires permission and access to the original images used by the creators. The restrictions on copyright are similar to those of other published material on the web. The creators have drawn a balance between making the base accessible to a wide range of users, and the usual restrictions placed on copyrighted material. As far as possible, many of the images published on the database are owned or have been taken by the researchers themselves, or they have themselves obtained permission to publish these images on the web.

The traffic in images

The construction and use of the image-base *Cultural Crossings* raises questions which are most relevant – if not seminal – to the feminist project. To understand the strengths and weaknesses inherent in different data sources with regard to the images, we need to know when an image was made and why, by whom, under what circumstances, what the limits of the chosen media

are, to what extent we may draw conclusions, and so on. One of the ways to guard against errors of judgement and hasty generalisations is to employ the image alongside textually-based data so that different sources of data speak to each other. Longitudinal approaches, i.e., looking at phenomena that change over time, are useful in eliminating bias. The recurrence of meaning across culture and time allows us less room for error in reading the language of the visual. This allows for sensitive and informed readings of visual metaphors that uncover layers of meaning, thus decoding the value of each meaning in order to arrive at logical conclusions. The value of doing this is inherent in the analysis we are engaged in concerning visuality; it indicates that we understand the processes by which symbols and metaphors are reproduced over time and space and (perhaps more so) how ideologies change. The image is a master conveyor of ideology. The traffic in images is therefore also about challenging errant ideologies, which might otherwise be reproduced repeatedly. A good example is the way in which *Cultural Crossings* challenges the meaning of feminism, in order to allow many different definitions of what constitutes feminism. Drawing on a project entitled *The Making of Feminisms in the Caribbean*,⁶ the *Cultural Crossings* database incorporates the histories and figures who together participated in the making of feminisms over a century in the region. How we determine feminism over time may be judged through the actions of those we define as contributing to the feminist movement at different historical moments in varied cultural contexts. Such data, for instance, reveals the specificity of the feminist movement in the Caribbean, showing how it evolved differently from movements in Europe and North America, even while there were parallels and common goals.

Building the image-base from two different regions and university sites also raised some of the political issues that challenge scholars who work with both gender and visuality. First among these is the question of which images are to be selected and by whom; second, how do we re-present images so that our subjects are invested with agency rather than re-created as objects of our gaze; and third, how do we read visual images derived from different media and produced for different contexts and times, each with their own rules and history of development and application. The primary intent of the producers of this image-base is not to suggest that these areas are unproblematic, but to invite the user to learn more about the methods and materials that she or he will be drawing on to enhance the cross-cultural understanding of gender. Their and our task is to unsettle deliberately the dominant gaze. Visuality demands

that we work in a mode of continuous deconstruction/reconstruction.

The impact on curriculum development cannot be overemphasised. The discipline of gender is still relatively youthful at tertiary level, in terms of both teaching and research, and there is still much to be done in terms of tightening and rigour. In addition, gender is a discipline that has been particularly responsive to practices. The latter must be constantly informed by the lived realities of men and women, preferably from a comparative perspective, so that the subject matter of gender is not reified into cultural antagonisms between the sexes in one district or society. Thus the exchange of curricula, teaching approaches, methods and materials will serve to enhance and sustain the discipline of gender itself. It is important that the continued development of gender studies is fostered by triangular exchanges of scholarship and activism throughout the globe, fostering equal partnerships in knowledge sharing and concept creation.

One of the immediate goals of the database project as conceived between the two researchers was to introduce Emory graduate students to the Caribbean as a possible site for dissertation research at a fairly early stage, allowing them early access to archival and unpublished material as they prepared proposals for dissertation research. It was also felt that there would be a similar broadening of scope of the vision of students at the University of the West Indies as they shaped their graduate projects. At the same time, faculty at both institutions could develop their networks of collegial contacts for teaching and training students. More importantly, gender studies from non-Western regions, like the Caribbean and Africa, help to diffuse the hegemony of traditionally Eurocentric gender teachings. To teach the construction of femininity in, say, Ghana (as opposed to Europe) to students in the Caribbean expands the possibilities for seeing cultures in new ways.

Finally, one of the important goals of the database is to enhance individual creativity and confidence among students who may excel through a wider variety of means of expression. For instance, they may choose to present essays through digital story-telling as opposed to relying entirely on text-based data. Such methods provide teachers with a way to hold student interest and allow for a mutually shared process of learning in the classroom. Optimistically, such methods may engage students and society in a critical awareness of the use, abuse and limits of technology. In the final analysis, however, it is useful to remember that technology merely provides the tools to aid human creativity and growth; it is not a substitute for learning.

To visualise is to imagine. What the visual scholar needs is to be able to invite their imagination to operate more freely, even while following the rules of “objectivity”. This perhaps is one of the main goals of trafficking gender through the combined spheres of visuality and the written text.

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Footnotes

- 1 Phrase used by Patricia Hayes, one of the organisers of the Gender and Visuality Conference, University of Western Cape, South Africa, August 2004.
- 2 A series of research assistants have supported the building of the database. Those in the Caribbean have included Kimberly Byng, Shelene Gomes and Michelle Seeraj. At Emory University, technical expert Yvan Bamps has been the major resource on whom the project has depended.
- 3 The image-base (which is still under construction) has already been published on the websites of both campuses – University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago, and Emory, Atlanta. At a recent meeting between the two researchers, it was agreed that some of the problems of access to a wide range of users would be resolved by placing it on the world wide web. The details including copyright issues for this are being investigated, but it is hoped that by the end of 2006 the database will be accessible on the web.
- 4 Now in press at Macmillan UK/Palgrave US.
- 5 Four segments of this documentary series have been completed, with three remaining segments unfinished. The documentary is geared for teaching as well as popular viewing.

- 6 *The Making of Caribbean Feminisms* has been an ongoing research and activism project of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the St Augustine and Kingston campuses of the University of the West Indies since 1999.

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Review

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Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis, ed. Kingston, Jamaica:

Ian Randle Publishers, 2003.



Daughters of the Diaspora embarks on the important undertaking of mapping a literary tradition of Afro-Hispanic writers in the Spanish Caribbean, Central America, South America, North America and Africa. This collection contains poetry, fiction, essays and personal narratives by 20 writers that span the twentieth century, from Virginia Brindis de Salas, born in 1908, to Mayra Santos-Febres, born in 1966. Miriam DeCosta-Willis presents English translations of representative work of each author along with interviews and critical essays by 15 scholars. In this way, the anthology provides a critical context and maps each writer's contribution to a black women's literary tradition in the Spanish-speaking world.

In her introductory essay, DeCosta supplies a rich historical and literary context within which the writers presented in this anthology produced their work. She maps a fascinating set of connections between authors, themes and genres across countries and continents that lead her to assert the existence of a black women's literary tradition in the Spanish-speaking world. Beyond the writers whose works are presented in this collection, the references to many others in the Spanish Caribbean, Africa and South, Central and North America, suggest new and challenging possibilities for scholars interested in further research.

DeCosta-Willis describes her task in compiling this anthology as an "archeological project of excavating, preserving and disseminating the writing of African-descended women" (xiii). Early writers such as Juana Pastor and Cristina Ayala in Cuba and Virginia Brindis de Salas of Uruguay published in the periodical press. Julia de Burgos self-published her *Poema en veinte surcos*; other of her works were never published and were lost. Some of Brindis de Sala's works have been out of print for many years, or have disappeared. The search for writings by

black women in newspapers and other periodicals, as well as their self-published works, is a fascinating project that will surely reveal new works and uncover new authors in many Spanish-speaking countries.

In addition to locating the works, this project requires the naming of a subject that at the beginning of the century was excluded from a literary canon that was predominantly masculinist, racist and white. In written history, black and mulatta women are largely invisible; or when they are present, they are mentioned in passing or cited out of context. Thus, the archeological project embarked on in this anthology requires careful socio-historic contextualisation, and also often a reading against the grain in order to discover the strategies used by the writers to introduce themselves into the literary canon. Jean Franco (1989) in *Plotting Women* invited us to ponder over “the different forms of the struggle for interpretive power and what they meant within their socio-historic context” (xii). This strategy is also used by Magaly Roy-Féquièrre in *Women, Creole Identity, and Intellectual Life in Early Twentieth Century Puerto Rico* (2004).

This critical reading is challenging and complex, and generates a variety of interpretations of the texts and the positions of the writers on the debates they address. Carmen María Colón Pellot’s *Ambar Mulato* is an interesting case. In this volume, Claudette Williams recognises in Colón Pellot an affirmation of her mulatta racial identity, but sees her poetry mostly as a tragic illustration of the “internalization of the aesthetic, sexual and moral devaluation of the colored woman” (39). Williams interprets Colón Pellot’s use of the term “the perfect negro” (to distinguish presumably inferior full-blooded blacks from mulattoes) as a repudiation of African ancestry and fear of blackness. Gladys Jiménez Muñoz (2005) proposes a different interpretation of this author in her essay in another anthology titled *Contrapunto de Género y Raza en Puerto Rico*. She locates Colón Pellot within the discussions of national identity that sought to erase all linkages with Africa. In order to enter this dialogue, Colón Pellot uses her identity as a mulatta so that she can participate in a voice that is “legitimate” enough to be heard. Muñoz Jiménez argues that if Colón Pellot gives the impression of racial denial by evoking the myth of “the perfect negro”, it is only with the intention of exposing the mythical whiteness of Puerto Rican Creole nationalism. Hence, Colón Pellot’s affirmation that *all* Puerto Ricans have black blood in their veins “*jibara vetuada de sangre mulata*”. The controversies surrounding Colón Pellot’s work are definitely an example of the struggles for interpretative power by black women. DeCosta Willis’ compilation opens and widens these debates in a very significant way.

It must be noted that contemporary Afro-Hispanic women writers have indeed gained a space within the literary canon. An example of this is Mayra Santos Febres, whose work has been translated into English, Italian, French and German, and who has won various important international literary honours. Nonetheless, as Santos Febres states, women writers are expected to deal with certain themes and to write according to what she calls “the women’s literature” formula (454). “The existence of a Black writer in Latin America, or in the Caribbean to a lesser extent, is pretty precarious. If he or she does not become a token s/he becomes a symbol of national origin, of the past” (456).

There is no doubt that *Daughters of the Diaspora* fills an important space in the discussion of race, gender and the literary canon. It builds important connections throughout the Spanish-speaking world as well as making this literature more accessible to an English-speaking audience. It proposes and invites further contributions to an important, complex and intriguing research agenda.

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Review

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Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel.

Esi Sutherland-Addy and Aminata Diwa, eds.

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2005.

Upon receiving this volume, I did not think it was possible for anyone to read through this intimidatingly large book in its entirety. Yet I soon found myself at its final line, and all I could think was “There’s got to be more!”

West Africa and the Sahel follows *The Southern Region*, in the intrepid “Women Writing Africa” project, which endeavours to re/write African women into global and African histories; a long overdue project. Africanists have taken on the challenge of reinstating Africans within human history; while feminists have pursued a similar task, seeking to restore women to accounts that have focused on men’s stories. Not surprisingly, neither front has yet been successful in including and representing African women. The resultant double silence re-establishes old myths: that the African woman has not been present in history; and neither has she documented (systematically or otherwise) the story of *her* own life and circumstances. These myths, and the historical omissions which they engender, fail to recognise African women as active agents of social, political and economic processes. The “Women Writing Africa” project is a welcome addition to a body of work aimed at debunking such notions and rehabilitating African women’s voices. *West Africa and the Sahel* offers a broad introduction to West African women’s history and literature through the songs, poetry and prose of West African women. The work is available in both English and French volumes.

To produce a representative anthology of West Africa presents a colossal challenge, considering the large and complex ground – geographically, linguistically, ethnically, culturally, historically and nationally – to be covered. I was acutely aware of this as I began reading the work, and was fearful of finding yet another hyper-generalised overview of “African women’s words,” without much attention paid to historical or cultural context. To negotiate this challenge, the team that produced the text consisted of over 150 researchers, translators and editors working in 26 languages. The countries representing

the region include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Togo and Guinea Bissau were excluded for what were described as “logistical reasons.” Justifying their regional scope, the editors state that they produced the volume with the goal of viewing the “whole region as one life zone through the recurring themes and tropes – both historical and literary – of women’s experience: most saliently women are organizers and the glue for their communities; women as subject to recurrent migrations, amalgamations, and fragmentations, including the colonial emphasis on women as central to the physical work of sustaining lives and families economically; women as crucially defined by their status as mothers” (xiv).

Besides the issue of representing the diversity of the places and times under study, I also wondered how the editors would represent the difference between women’s oral performances and written words. This is an important consideration as the performativity, artistic form and expressiveness of an oral text are, of course, lost or altered when it is transcribed to the written page. The introduction to the anthology addresses such issues, noting in particular the difficulties faced in dating oral texts. A lengthy paragraph is provided at the beginning of all texts and extracts, placing each piece into historical context. Furthermore, accounting for the great diversity of oral literature that exists, the editors state that their selections are representative for an investigation of “how women, by linking words, images, and rhythms, continue to transmit knowledge and aesthetic norms as well as insights about the complexity of relationships in society and the family. [From these we can] see how orature provides a forum for the power struggles between men and women, for the exploration of the boundaries of public and private spheres” (7).

I certainly found this to be true as I read through the oral texts. These texts also challenged me to re/think the notion of “space”, as it is a concept we often imagine within very rigid historical or geographic confines. As I looked at the pieces, I could empathise with the editors’ difficulties in dating them or in naming their authors, as the pieces have clearly been performed, adapted and transformed through time. One such example is “The Plump Woman Song,” which begins:

When the bony woman hears the drum beat the komkom-no-aci air,
 She springs up, then collapses on her bed.
 Her men-folk cry, Hide her! Hide her!
 The grandmothers cry, Let us hide her.
 The mothers cry, Hide her! Hide her!

The song ends:

Her co-wife retorts,
No hiding place, today!
The drums keep beating
No hiding place today for a woman who is so meager
You could lodge a balanites, an entire date palm and its roots,
In the empty space between her two buttocks! (94)

This song is performed at the opening of *Mani Foori*, a festival celebrating plumpness that takes place in rural Songhai-Zarma societies. It is dated 1972, yet Fatimata Mounikaila, who introduces the piece, notes that the first two lines of the last stanza (“As if the whole Kebbi army had swooped down on her, / As if the whole Zamfara army swooped down on her”) refer to two powerful Hausa states that rose in the early sixteenth century, with the Kebbi army in fact defeating the army of the Songhai Empire. This reference to such a distant history in what remains a contemporary performance certainly blurs my notions of history as being in opposition to the present. I found the song to be most interesting, particularly because of the equation of women’s attractiveness to the general well-being of a family or society, which certainly forms part of present hegemonic practice, although in this case, there is a very specific link to production and reproduction.

Speaking of reproduction, the editors note the emphasis on African women as mothers of various sorts – be it of a nation, a society or a single child. I was particularly struck by this communal Igbo song, which illustrates the point:

Where is it from, eh? It is from the womb.
Where is it from, eh? It is from the womb.
A policeman – he is from the womb.
A lawyer – he is from the womb.
A doctor – he is from the womb (96).

Introducing two Igbo songs sung in celebration of birth, the editors explain that a day is set aside following a birth for women to rejoice with the new mother and also “to reaffirm themselves as a community of mothers. Underlying the joy is the relief that the new mother has escaped the fate of a woman denied her personhood and fulfillment because of her inability to procreate” (95). What I also find striking about the song above is the emphasis on social reproduction; the womb described does not just make babies, it produces policemen, lawyers and doctors, who will presumably perform vital social functions and add to the wealth of the society at large.

Motherhood also offers women an opportunity to make explicit social commentary, for example through the use of lullabies. As Esi Sutherland-Addy and Fatimata Mounkaila suggest, “while these songs function primarily to calm, celebrate, and affirm a child, other themes suggest a wider audience” (151). For example, the Sereer poem performed in present-day Senegal goes:

Ayo, my little one
 Keep on crying
 And I'll swap you for salt
 The salt will be seized
 And I'll come back in tears (151).

The notion that a person can be exchanged for salt reminds the reader that human slaves were indeed exchanged in such a manner. As the introduction to this and other lullabies suggests, a mother's fear of being shamed by a child functions obliquely both as a critique of a social order that was both oppressive to women and children, and (on a “larger” scale) as a critique of an economic system that reduced human beings to mere commodities. This poses a challenge to dominantly-held notions that women generally were and continue to be accepting of oppressive social orders.

Following a section on oral literature, the volume is separated thematically into specific time periods, with the section “Thirteenth Century to 1916: The Age of African Empires,” being the first to include both written and oral texts. One of these texts is a letter written in 1739 in a now unidentifiable African language, and then translated into Dutch Creole. This letter was written by “Marotta, now Madlena from Poppo Africa”, a female slave presumed to be from present-day Benin, to the Queen of Denmark. She wrote the letter at the Moravian mission established in St. Thomas, stating:

At the time I live in Poppo in Africa, I served the Lord Mau. Now that I have come to the Land of the Whites I don't want to serve that Lord. I do not have reason to serve that Lord; my heart is saddened because Negro woman cannot serve the Lord Jesus on St. Thomas. If the Whites do not want to serve the Lord, be that as it may. But if the poor Black brethren and sisters want to serve the Lord, they have to behave as if they were Maroons (123).

This letter, which critiques the hypocrisy of slavery, and uses the rhetoric of Christianity to justify freedom for slaves, is a significant example of African women's agency, not only in commenting on the oppressions they face, but in seeking paths to freedom as well.

I was very excited to come across several poems written by Nana Asma'u, who I discovered to be the sister of Ahmadu Bello of the Sokoto Caliphate. I remember learning about Ahmadu Bello and other such men, and the advent of Islam in West Africa, as an undergraduate in a course on the history of the region. I recall that my professor challenged us to imagine the social and political shifts that were occurring at the time, and to also consider people's relations to these changes. I asked how we could do so when all we learnt came from and usually was about men. As a class, we were then asked to imagine what it would mean to include women in our historical picture. I found the beginnings of an answer to this challenge when I came across the writings of Nana Asma'u in this anthology. It was like asking the famous question posed by Western feminists, "Where is Shakespeare's sister?" – and in the case of Bello, there she was! Aside from my excitement about there being a "famous sister," writing to match her "famous brother," the poems Nana Asma'u wrote are important in their own right. She was literate in Arabic and proficient in a number of local languages such as Fulfulde, Tamajaq and Hausa, and her poems were able to provide an alternative perspective to the works of her father and brother. Through her use of African languages, "she feminized the classical Arabic Jihad Literature, and in the process shifted its masculinist formulation" (124), as access to formal systems of education in which classical Arabic was taught were often unavailable to ordinary women. Developing these texts in a language accessible to women, from the perspective of women's gendered experience, represented a significant transformation.

In the section of the anthology titled "1916–1970: The Rise of Nationalism," I noticed that a lot more of the texts were written by individual women; the "great women" whose personal ingenuity, opportunities and perhaps privilege allowed them access to literacy and autonomy in ways denied to the women represented by the communal and oral texts. There were two exceptions to the types of women represented in this section: an interview and the testimony of a woman before a commission of inquiry. I really enjoyed the latter piece; the woman in question had refused to let the chief's census-taker count her and her animals, for fear that women too would be taxed like the men had been for some time. During her testimony, she unambiguously criticises the chief: "He knew I had some means and that is why he sent his boys to my house to do the counting first. I told him that I was once a rich woman, but that he has been taking money away from me I had now no money to pay tax" (173).

This testimony suggests how women protested unfair impositions by a colonial government. It also reveals, from a woman's perspective, how the colonial project's new forms of administration ignored and undermined women's traditional status.

From a similar position, P. A. Itayemi Ogundipe's short story, "Nothing So Sweet" (189), tells the tale of a young woman whose marriage is arranged at the age of two. Her future husband, who is illiterate, pays for her education in the hopes that she will later monitor his accounts and read and write letters for him. The young woman is unaware that her marriage has been arranged with this man until her education is halted. She is not interested in the arrangement and resists it for a long time. Yet because the man has provided for her family and paid the dowry, she is eventually forced into his home. Her only hope lies in her "European friends" at a nearby mission, and so for fear of the colonial government (which he associates with the mission), her husband allows her to go home, after which she runs to the mission where a space has been reserved for her to study nursing. When it appeared as though this woman had no choice, she invented some space for negotiation. Choosing to run away (to nearby missions, for instance) is certainly a choice many African women have made to escape such circumstances. The title of the story, "Nothing So Sweet," speaks of an open-ended freedom, reflected in the protagonist's final words: "I was free, *free* ..." (203).

The volume opens with lines from a poem by Tanella Boni, and three poems from her anthology, *There is No Suitable Word*, are included in the part that deals with the 21st century. I was particularly struck by the poem "Silence Came Reluctantly," which was included in a section commenting on how the "frequency, violence and extreme horror of the conflicts on the continent of Africa in the last decade of the twentieth century have provoked many African writers" (412). The poem reads:

Silence came reluctantly
 And crossed our separate paths
 At the intersection of life and death
 Power has stolen the key to our hearts
 And sold us spare parts
 To the kingdom of the amnesiac sun,
 Of the song of our most lunatic dreams.
 But we no longer dream you say:
 We buy our lives on a silver platter.

Here survival's law is etched in letters of fire:
Be silent and eat!
Quiet everyone, we're shooting!
Sing if you want,
Be gauge the truth of your words
And long live the Unrivaled Thought!

Having read songs of celebration and texts revealing women's negotiations of daily life as individuals and within communities, this poem is a sobering reminder of the immense devastation women on this continent have faced and continue to endure. It serves as a reminder of what it means for African women to be continually silenced and rendered invisible by violence in all its many forms.

Just as the volume was powerfully begun, it is closed on a similarly strong note, with an interview with Aminata Traore entitled "Africa Is Not Poor". Here Traore states:

It is clear that a new awareness must come to be, a new collective awareness which will go beyond the limits of the continent – this is the strength of Africa. When I say that Africa is not poor, I mean that Africa is not poor because of the richness buried below its surface. Africa is not poor because of its people's determination to live here, to live here with dignity, but also because of its people's intelligence and talent and of its sons and daughters who have built the rest of the world. If the so-called developed world has something to brag about, its pretensions to grandeur are, in a large measure, owed to the strength it drew from Africa (450).

This passage echoes the optimism I felt as I began reading the volume. The editors had spoken earlier of a number of competing interests as the volume was first conceptualised – tensions between African-born women and women of African descent in the diaspora; and between West African scholars and feminists and Euro-American scholars who were aware of the demands of the Western publishing market. Despite their differences, and despite the implications their conflicts would have had on the production of knowledge by and about West African women, I imagine that all these stakeholders felt pride upon the publication of the volume. As a southern African woman, I certainly felt that I too had been rehabilitated through the words expressed by women living in another region of Africa across different periods of time. Traore's closing comment alerts us to the potential wealth and unique resource represented by the experiences of African women on the continent and in the

diaspora. I would thus definitely recommend this collection as an introduction to the history and literature of West African women, expressed, for the first time, in their own voices. I look forward to future volumes.

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Review

Barbara Boswell

Tropical Fish: Stories out of Entebbe.

Doreen Baingana. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005; Cape Town: Oshun 2006.

Like the child lured, again and again, by the mysterious intimacies of her parents' bedroom in Doreen Baingana's opening short story, "Green Stones," so too is the reader drawn to savour, again and again, the subtle delights of this collection of interlinked short stories.

Set in Uganda in the aftermath of the rule of military dictator Idi Amin, *Tropical Fish: Stories out of Entebbe* charts the coming of age of three sisters – Christine, Patti and Rosa – in the middle-class city of Entebbe. Together, the stories form a *bildungsroman*, providing vignettes from each girl's life. The youngest sister, Christine, eventually immigrates to the United States, and her experiences and subjectivity take centre stage toward the end of the collection.

Consciously writing against the stereotype of African woman as victim, Baingana's short stories – "linked like sisters, forming a family that is stronger than its individual parts" (Preface to Harlem Moon edition, xiii) – alternate between the narrative voices of the three sisters, providing a variety of perspectives on growing up African, Ugandan, and relatively privileged. The multiplicity of viewpoints is reinforced by the varying forms Baingana chooses to employ throughout the collection: some stories are first-person accounts, others have an omniscient narrator; "Hunger" is a diary entry, and "A Thank-You Note" a letter. This form and narrative technique is a departure from traditional, postcolonial women's coming-of-age novels, such as Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* or Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, in that it provides the perspectives of three very different young women at different developmental stages. In this way, *Tropical Fish* works to undercut monolithic notions of African female experience or womanhood.

In describing the ordinary, everyday rhythms of the girls' lives, Baingana provides a textured and complex picture of middle-class African womanhood

within a specific urban location. As the children of government bureaucrats, the three sisters attend the best schools in Entebbe, are sent to prestigious private boarding-schools, and are part of the elite at Makerere University. In the words of Rosa, one of the sisters, the girls are "... the cream of the crop. We had dodged the bullets of Amin, Obote, all the coups, the economic war, exile and return, and here we were on the road to success. We were the lucky ones, the chosen few" ("A Thank-You Note," 71–72). Yet their lives are dotted with periods of instability: Patti bears months of starvation at her boarding-school in the story, "Hunger," and the girls stand in line for hours to get their rations of basic foods like sugar.

The opening story, "Green Stones", takes the reader into the private world of a successful, middle-class Ugandan couple via the youngest sister's voyeuristic visits to her parents' bedroom. Here Christine samples – through taste, touch and smell – an array of jewellery presented by her father to her mother. Draping herself in these beads while posing in front of her parents' mirror, the young Christine envisions the kind of femininity she is preordained to inherit from her mother:

When I grew up, I would use lots of cool white cream like she did: Ponds, Venus de Milo, cocoa butter, perfumes called Lady, Chanel, Essence. I'd paint my fingernails and toenails with designs in glaring red, and fling my hands around dramatically like a conjurer. Wear lots of lacy panties, petticoats, bras, and stockings, all in frilly white and pink, with flowers and sequins, and become Maama. Women were nice and pleasant and sweet, like a bowl of fruit or fresh flowers (7–9).

Christine's mother's status as woman is reiterated each time her husband performs the intricate ritual he uses to present his wife with various types of jewellery. "For you," says Christine's father, solemnly, as he presents her mother with the green necklace of the story's title. Her mother, in accepting his gifts, is "crowned; he was her humble subject. She accepted his adoration with a smile in the silence" (9). The conferring of jewellery from the father to mother is almost ceremonial; observed by the three girls, it establishes a template for the type of womanhood Christine, Patti and Rosa should aspire to, and a guide to intimate relations between the sexes. Their parents' bedroom, with its aura of "sacredness" – "as if it was a quiet, empty cathedral or mysterious fortune-teller's den" (1), comes to symbolise, for Christine, her parents' union – an impenetrable, alluring force. It is against the family's model of femininity and heterosexual relationships that we track the development of the three

girls into women. None of the girls, however, choose this ordained path into womanhood: by the end of the anthology, they have all digressed from the performance of gender presented to them during their childhood.

“Hunger” is written from the perspective of Patti, the oldest sister, and documents a period of severe deprivation at the exclusive boarding-school, Gayaza. Because of food shortages, the girls subsist mostly on black tea, dried bread and rotting vegetables, and Patti’s hunger forces her to beg for food from wealthier girls. Nominated for the Caine Prize for African writing in 2004, “Hunger” demonstrates a range of subjectivities and experiences among adolescent, middle-class girls – a group that might seem fairly homogenous at first glance. Linette, the daughter of a Minister, makes *kotys* or servants out of the other girls in exchange for food. The less privileged girls are forced to groom and serve Linette, or go hungry. Patti fetches her tea in exchange for some sugar, and is humiliated. Throughout the story Patti, who is “saved” by becoming a born-again Christian, comforts herself with the knowledge that it must be God’s will for her to starve. “Why couldn’t I see the glory of God, instead of concentrating on my stomach?” Patti chastises herself (25). Patti finds solace for her unrelenting hunger in religion, and the story’s dramatic climax sees Patti tearfully releasing her anxiety about starving at a prayer meeting. But while Patti finds temporary relief in casting her troubles before God, her lack of political action means that her situation remains the same, and she is left to face yet another day without food.

Baingana’s focus on the minutiae of the girls’ lives, rather than larger political themes in the volatile period after Amin’s dictatorship, is a strategic choice. The stories in *Tropical Fish* are not overly concerned with pontificating or demonstrating the hardship of economic instability. Rather, they aim to show subtly how the personal is always political. The stories demonstrate the ways in which ordinary people go about living their lives, surviving political repression and economic decline. Baingana deftly evokes the way in which despotism at first induces fear, then soon becomes normalised as individuals adapt in order to cope and survive. It is the texture of such warped “normality” that Baingana expertly evokes in many of her stories; this is the anthology’s strength.

Through the unselfconscious eyes of Christine in “First Kiss” – on the surface, a story about a young girl’s first romantic encounter – the reader is transported into a scene of insidious decay, when Christine surveys her old school yard after a few years’ absence:

Things must have started falling apart years ago. She hadn't noticed it then, probably because she was here every day. The change was gradual and the result normal, like many other things about Amin's time, including the everyday fear in the air. She remembered how everyone had laughed in astonishment, then got used to it, when Amin by decree banned minis and wigs ... (39).

Amin's presence and legacy in the family's life is muted, but still palpable; it creates a world where the threat of persecution always hovers, and becomes normal. This presence is not unlike Christine's Taata in "Green Stones," a patriarch who "held himself in all day like an ever-present threat, and then at night unleashed himself and his whole tight day on Maama" (10). Baingana does not need to make explicit the parallels between a controlling, alcoholic father and an autocratic, punitive political regime. A sense of the ordinary imbued with the vague, pervasive threat of terror becomes the norm for the girls in *Tropical Fish*, and is Baingana's oblique comment on life in a political dictatorship.

A complex and contradictory picture of the concept of "home" emerges through Baingana's fictional portrayal of the girls' everyday lives. Home, for the sisters, is a space of relative privilege; yet the threat of instability and violence always hovers. As the meaning of "home" changes within the postcolonial political context, the girls renegotiate their relationships to their home and concept of place. In this process, their subjectivities are also renegotiated. As bell hooks has noted, home is often a disjunctive location for the postcolonial subject: "At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations" (hooks, 1984: 19). As the girls enter adulthood, their relationships to home are often fraught. Christine, in particular, undertakes a diasporic journey to the United States of America, where her understanding of what it means to inhabit a home is radically altered.

Christine's migration to the United States, where she eventually becomes a poet and writer, brings to mind Carole Boyce Davies' concept of black women writers' "migratory subjectivity". For Davies, black women's writing can be likened to a migratory experience, since both the acts of writing and migration involve boundary-crossing, and the constant renegotiation of identity. Christine, in migrating to the United States and starting to write poetry, performs a double migration – both into a foreign country and the realm of authorship.

This refashioning of the individual as writer, and the subsequent claiming of the US as a home of sorts, is the subject matter in the short story "Lost in

Los Angeles.” Here Christine becomes part of the Los Angeles poetry scene, and begins to find acceptance and a feeling of belonging through writing. Christine visits a poetry café and decides that she, too, could write poetry if she wanted to. She settles on the following topic: “I decided to write a poem, to clarify things, to try, anyway. Not about home No. Maybe something about the adventure of being lost and what I can find” (117–118).

Christine befriends a white American poet, Feather, who claims to be part Native American. At the end of the story, Feather and Christine sit on a hill overlooking Los Angeles as Feather declares: “This is my people’s land, you know All this.” In the last line of the story, Christine retorts: “‘Mine too,’ I say. What the hell” (119).

It seems that the act of writing and putting her poem into the public domain entitles Christine to lay claim to this new land to which she has immigrated. However, Baingana qualifies Christine’s claim; during an interview, she notes that a fine line exists between carving out space for oneself in a new place, and appropriating someone else’s space. If leaving “home” has been crucial to finding the writer inside of Christine, the act of writing, in turn, has helped inscribe a new discursive space to call “home.” Through the act of writing, Christine is able to claim and inhabit a new home she has created for herself through her writing. This new home inevitably complicates her relationship with Uganda and Entebbe.

When Christine returns to Uganda in “Questions of Home”, she struggles to adapt to her former home and the perceived inefficiency in the government department where she finds a new job. As she struggles to rekindle her relationship with her mother, Christine realises that for her, “home” does not exist, and that her fantasies were home:

Back in the States after a hard day of fake smiles and isolation, alone in her apartment at night, Christine had imagined the three of them, with Patti, as close companions growing older together The proverbial strong African family The dream itself was home (145).

Christine realises that to feel a sense of belonging in Uganda, she will need to learn to speak a new language: “a new language formed by old ones running underneath and over one another. An ever-changing in-between” (147). With *Tropical Fish*, Baingana has also started to create a new language for exploring black female subjectivity. Though some stories will grip the reader more than others, the collection gives singular insights into women’s lives on the African continent and in the diaspora, and will be useful for exploring race, class and identity in a women’s studies classroom.

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Taking to the streets for renewal and rejuvenation: *Lavagem do Bonfim 2006*

Gillian Marcelle

"Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge" (Audre Lorde).

When I went to Salvador da Bahia, a beautiful coastal city that enshrines the African heart of Brazil, I did not have an intellectual experience – instead, I drank in my surroundings through my senses. Food that reminded me of home, beautiful bodies, swaying hips, tight muscles, sun, light breezes, smiling faces, and pulsating samba rhythms, all combined to make a sensual feast.

There is a lot to ponder in this part of Brazil, which garnered wealth through hardwood and sugar cultivation, but at a terrible cost. Over two centuries, over 1,3 million African slaves were shipped to this region – more than double the number brought to the entire United States ("A Short History", 2006). During the colonial period, more than 40% of the population in Salvador were enslaved, with the slave population predominantly African-born until around the mid-nineteenth century. With slavery abolished in Brazil only in 1888, the diasporic African communities here, drawn largely from West Africa, mixed with those indigenous peoples not displaced by famine and disease and Portuguese overlords and missionaries to create a unique and lively amalgam of cultures. Today, Salvador and Bahia are the centres of Afro-Brazilian culture, which is vividly expressed in music, dance (samba), popular foods, religion and life-style (*o estido da vida*).

Nevertheless, I found that my thinking was not done in my head – in this case, my whole body was engaged in my experiences. Whether I was exploring the Museum of Modern Art MMA-Bahia, sipping *caipirinha* on the beach, getting very sea-sick on a catamaran voyage to Morro de São Paulo, watching *capoeira* in Pelourinho or learning Afro-Brazilian dance steps, there was a mind-body connection that often eludes me.

This exploration of one aspect of Bahian culture will remain true to the essence of that experience and not attempt to refashion it into academic form or structure. I hope by telling it as it was, you, the reader, will share some of my childlike excitement and get a glimpse of a fascinating happening.

My personal reflections will be threaded with the thoughts of feminist scholars in an attempt to clarify how my experiences might relate to wider issues.

Time magazine has described Salvador da Bahia as the “New Orleans of Brazil” and it is well known for its festivals and annual carnival. *Lavagem do Bonfim* is the second largest street festival in Bahia after carnival. It takes place on the second Thursday in January and has done so every year for the last 150 years. It seems to be a spontaneous outpouring onto the streets of Salvador, not as hectic and physically demanding as Carnival, but regarded with a special reverence.

My Brazilian friends who invited me to take part in the festival said it was “religious”, but with a good “party vibe”, but could give little information concerning its significance. I decided to trust them, but was a bit worried as to how I would explain to my Portuguese language teachers that I was taking the day off to go partying in the streets of the city.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I did do some online research to find out a bit more about the history and significance of the festival. And what an interesting tale it is. It seems that African slaves were banned from practicing their indigenous religions and from participating in Catholic masses. In protest, they devised versions of Christian rituals and claimed their saints, often merging them with *orixas* (spirits or deities that reflect a particular energy or characteristic of the supreme being, *Olodumare*) and other deities. Over the years, the January festival has emerged, combining all these traditions. Cleansing and purification, as well as remnants of protest, remain central. The *Lavagem do Bonfim* festival fuses African religious expression with Catholicism in an intermingling so intricate that the individual parts are indistinguishable. The experience of African syncretism in Bahia, the combination of *Candomblé* (a religion based on African traditions) and Portuguese Christianity bears similarity to other diaspora experiences, reflecting the characteristics of symbolic reinterpretation and continued dynamism (Duncan, 2000). Protests against the banning of African ritual meet the father of all *Orixas*, and the site is a venerable Catholic church, the *Igreja do Bonfim*. Invitations to this religious festival are handed out by *blocos* (bands) to announce the start of the Carnival process.

I need not have worried about explaining my absence. Showing very good common sense, the language school declared that on *Bonfim* day, instruction would take the form of a practical workshop in the city centre. They also issued two pages of safety instructions that were clearly aimed at shielding their European charges from street crime and over-exuberant Brazilians. However,

I planned on having an adventure and insisted on hanging out with the locals. As a born and bred Trini (someone from Trinidad and Tobago), I was confident that I could deal with any street carnival atmosphere in the world. So off I went, camera in hand (this was strictly advised against), but remembering to “drink lots of coconut water”.

The form of the festival is as interesting as its content. It begins in the centre of the lower city, close to the largest former slave market, and takes a 12 km wander to the *Igreja do Bonfim* (Church of Bonfim) on the eastern side of Salvador. Hundreds of thousands of people throng onto the parade route, which is lined with spectators and well-wishers.

The parade itself is led by Brazilian women of African heritage. These leaders are generally dark-skinned, big-bodied women with breasts, hips, bellies and wrinkles. They comport themselves with self-awareness and dignity, and adorn themselves magnificently. They accessorise their ornate white embroidered gowns with gold bracelets, chains and bangles, and carry gourds containing perfumed lavender oil. Along the route they dispense this oil along with flowers. To my mind, this confirms Ann Cahill’s argument that rituals of feminine beautification can offer positive experiences rather than simply degrading and objectifying women (2003). The performance of the Bonfim women goes beyond the familiar feminist criticisms of beautification practices or a simplistic notion of celebrating female adornment. Theirs are beautification rituals that have strong communal, collective and shared characteristics, which not only add to enjoyment, but play other social roles, along the lines of what Cahill terms a “distinctly feminist (inter) subjectivity”.

Janell Hobson (2003) critiques discourses that position black female bodies as sexually grotesque simply because they deviate from dominant categories of (white) beauty. In this regard, the Bahian women leading the *Bonfim* parade successfully overturn white and Western stereotypes and standards of beauty. Other scholars have suggested that positive role-models such as these are important for creating healthy identities for women and challenging the notion that white attributes are the normative standard for beauty. Banks (2000) provides a cogent argument for how through rituals and celebration black women can change historical perceptions of their own beauty. Myself and others present experienced the African-ness of the Baianas leading the *Bonfim* parade as a source of strength and power. Their association with ancient civilisations was not air-brushed over, but rather drawn upon as a source of symbolic and mythical value.

The Baianas leading the procession are not simply beautiful; they are recognised spiritual leaders who hold power in their communities. Their public display and performance is different from that typically associated with carnivals in the Caribbean, where feminist scholars argue that women express power through vigorous displays of sexuality, demonstrating freedom of choice and independence from men and traditional gender roles (Dikobe, 2004; Barnes, 2000). Neither is theirs the “behind-the-scenes” organisational power associated with women’s role in formal religions (Baer, 1993). This was a very visible, expressive and vocal display of power and leadership by women of African heritage in a multi-racial society.

On *Bonfim* day, crowds surge towards these Baianas, reaching out, pleading to be touched, to be held and to receive blessings. On the steps of the church, it is these Afro-Brazilian women who play the lead role in the symbolic washing. As a black woman visitor, I did not expect that Afro-Brazilian women would be considered in a negative light. I don’t have a personal association with the “mammy” stereotypes discussed by many feminist scholars, or instinctively regard black women as representations of “servility, acquiescence and undesirability” (Duncan, 2001: 99–100). I do not experience automatic revulsion associated with large body size or have an expectation of passivity. However, I was struck by the degree of reverence accorded to the Baianas, and the sense of urgency with which men and women in the crowd sought their attention and favours. It is clear that the *Bonfim* festival creates a space in which traditional icons of African femininity are accorded respect.

This experience confirmed for me that elements within the diaspora provide wider definitions of female beauty, eschewing the vilification of beautification rituals present in some feminist theorising. The *Lavagem do Bonfim* festival I attended suggests that adornment, beautification, and particularly the communal and collective aspects of the ritual provide pleasure and positive reinforcement in spiritual, bodily and aesthetic senses.

This should not be read as suggesting that the image of womanhood presented here consistently confronted stereotypes of Western “beauty”. There is as much adoration of the lithe, tanned, waxed bodies that lounge around on Salvador’s beaches outside of the festival as there is for the Baianas!

To return to the festival itself, *Lavagem do Bonfim* is a psychedelic aesthetic experience. Brown and black bodies, blue skies and multi-coloured ribbons intermingle with the white clothing, worn to represent purity and cleansing (Devereaux, 2003). The religious intertwines with the political. Politicians, trade

unionists and community leaders all take part because the people expect it. As 2006 was election year in Brazil, none of the state and municipal leaders missed the opportunity to meet and greet the masses.

Arriving at the *Igreja do Bonfim* was in no way an anticlimax. I felt part of the mass ritual and performance, and shared the sense of culmination, even though I did not understand much of the speeches. On the church steps, the formal aspects of the ritual are enacted, including the ritual washing. The Baianas and their helpers hand out yet more multi-coloured ribbons, with whispered calls to make three wishes and receive blessings for the year to come. The expectation is that the touch and presence of the Baianas will assure that these New Year wishes are granted.

The faint-hearted do not make it all the way to the end of the procession, but are content to have a good time and drink plenty of beer nonetheless. The ceremonial formalities don't last too long, because this is Brazil, and there was serious partying to come.

The streets leading up to the church are turned into roadside discos and bars, alcohol and food is abundant, and the music is turned up. Women dance the erotic samba dressed in mini-skirts and tight skimpy tops, again underscoring the point that different notions of feminine beauty and sexuality are presented almost simultaneously as part of the performance of the festival. We know about embracing both the sacred and the profane in the Caribbean, but even I was surprised at the speed of the code-switching, from religion to party-time. I can understand why some traditionalists, and even young cultural adherents, complain that many who participate in *Bonfim* do so simply as an excuse to enjoy an early carnival in January. I also heard discussions about middle-class folk being too afraid to be with the people in the street, preferring to remain on their balconies and verandahs.

My own experience was one of pleasure. I enjoyed being part of a mass celebration. It didn't matter that many conversations around me were not in my mother tongue. I had an experience that went beyond words; there was a connection to Brazil, to the Caribbean and to Africa. The sharing, the knowing and the commonalities were intuitive. It began by simply allowing myself to feel – and then Bahia took over.

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