



# Gender, Generation and Memory: Remembering a Future Caribbean

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## Alissa Trotz

Associate Professor, New College, University of Toronto,  
Now  
Associate Professor in Women and Gender Studies and  
Director of the Undergraduate Caribbean Studies Program  
New College, University of Toronto

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## Editor's Note

Working Paper No.14 is based on a lecture delivered by Dr. Alissa Trotz, Associate Professor, New College University of Toronto, USA. Dr. Trotz delivered the 13th lecture in the series, *Caribbean Women: Catalysts for Change* on November 16th 2007; this series is dedicated to honouring the memory of Dame Nita Barrow, Governor General of Barbados 1990-1995, and the first subject of the research project, *Caribbean Women: Catalysts for Change*.

As a Caribbean feminist and scholar, Dr. Trotz mines the intersecting sites of diaspora, identities and constantly shifting Caribbean political economy. In the process she offers a searing assessment of a creeping social fragmentation in the region facilitated by the politics of polarization and division. While maintaining that we need to move past defensiveness and to engage each other, she proffers a different future and concludes with the gift of sociality. It is a social blue print from the indigenous Wai Wai of Guyana on how we can remain each other's keepers. She uses three dimensions of Dame Nita's public life to organize her lecture on the theme "Gender, Generation and Memory: Remembering a Future Caribbean." These themes are the Social Geography of a Pan-Caribbean Identity, Caribbean Movement and Political Conflict, and Social Justice and Gender Equality.

Examining the operations of gender in each of these themes, Trotz explores how a collective social amnesia has worked to effect the marginalization of Caribbean peoples by deploying the politics of polarization and division. She also suggests ways in which Caribbean peoples might rework narratives of exclusion through a preliminary discussion of counter-memories embedded in practices that do not follow the logic of borders internally or externally implied.

Alissa Trotz's analysis is insightful, rich and compelling. She presents a rarity in the academic community because while she sojourns in the academic community,

she traverses the terrains of Caribbean communities whether diasporic or state defined. As a scholar activist her voice and vision are clear and compelling. In the process she reveals the multiple and shifting realities of Caribbean women. Trotz uses these complex realities to question our understanding of migration, working class communities, regional integration and Caribbean development, and the place of gender in all of these sites.

## **Gender, Generation and Memory: Remembering a Future Caribbean<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

My paternal grandmother died in 2003 at the age of 95. Some years earlier, she had begun to lose her short-term memory, although this did not diminish her ability to recall events in (what was for me) the distant past, complete with time of day, what she was wearing and doing, in absolutely astonishing and minute detail. There is a medical diagnosis for this condition, but in the context of what I want to offer, I sometimes wonder whether my grandmother's selective forgetting metaphorically indexed a deeper sense that, in the dusk of her life, there was little that was memorable in the contemporary Caribbean.

This is a provocatively harsh opening, one that a glance at any Human Development Report – which notes that the Caribbean experience is one of political stability and relatively high social indicators - will challenge, but for Caribbean women and men like myself who came of age or were born in the decade of the 1980s and after, I say this deliberately in order to register that there is little of the anticipation and excitement that animated the pre-independence era. There is little sense of how popular discontent with the emerging political order's refusal to effect a radical break from the colonial past was channeled collectively, and of the energy that infused a number of social and political experiments in the decade of the 1970s, culminating in the Grenadian revolution in 1979.

A vibrant women's movement came into its own during these years, drawing on the creative energies of those who had been nurtured by the promise of citizenship, only to find that the place of women in an independent Caribbean was anything but equal.<sup>2</sup> This was the period that produced Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), which included women from

Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, as well as calls, led by the Global South, for a New International Economic Order.

These times, which in different ways appeared to offer rich and radical hope of transformation for all across the region, seem lost now from the vantage point of a present caught up in the singular logic of neoliberal globalization.<sup>3</sup> In these times democracy is linked to the free market, where commodification and consumerism extend into more and more aspects of our lives, where purchasing power is increasingly the criteria for citizenship, where a US-led war of terror is carried out in the name of protecting these so-called freedoms, a war that has touched down in the Caribbean in holding pens in Guantanamo Bay.

In the Caribbean, more than two decades after the introduction of structural adjustment programmes,<sup>4</sup> the region's future seems more than ever mortgaged to the interests of international capital. What do we have to show for it? The region's dependence on single and primary crops, (the Caribbean remains wedded to an unsustainable agricultural model (Weis 2007) and services (particularly tourism) has not shifted. This underlines the vulnerability of our overall position even for the more developed economies among us that have not, for example, been affected by the steady erosion of preferential arrangements under the WTO vis-à-vis sugar and banana regimes.

In broad terms, we face an extremely high rate of HIV infection, by some counts the second highest infection rates in the world. There are growing income inequalities in many countries; alarmingly high levels of violence, which has been described by economist Norman Girvan (2007) as poor-on-poor, poor-on-not-so-poor, state-on-poor, community-on-community. Levels of functional illiteracy are increasing, accompanied by limited job opportunities and unsustainable out-migration rates. A recent study found that between 76% and 83% of the highly skilled workforces of Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago migrated to OECD countries.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding some feminist successes and claims of male marginalization (a most misplaced accusation which has been effectively challenged by Eudine Barribeau (1997) and Linden Lewis (2003) among others, but which according to Gabrielle Jamela Hosein (2007) has greatly complicated women's organizing) women continue to lag behind men in political representation and experience higher rates of unemployment and poverty. This is especially so among female-headed households, even as domestic and sexual violence continue to be a daily feature of women's lives in the region.

Unlike the momentous shifts that we have witnessed in Latin American politics in recent years, in which candidates (one of them indigenous, two of them women) have been elected on platforms that – to varying degrees, from Venezuela to Argentina – openly challenge the impact of neoliberal reforms, there is no sense of a sea change on the political horizons of the Caribbean<sup>6</sup>. With rare exceptions the difference between parties is one of degree and not substance. While the logic of the Washington Consensus is not the subject of fundamental critical appraisal in public debate, its *fait accompli* status is never challenged. I am no pollster, but judging from my conversations with friends and colleagues and observations of the state of play in countries like Guyana, there appears to be widespread disaffection with the political status quo, and an overriding sense that the more things change, the more they damned well remain the same.

Outside of the formal political process, the regenerative potential of civil society has been dulled by what I would call NGO-speak. This has transformed the NGO movement into a sanitized, depoliticized space dominated by the language of 'stakeholders' looking for 'good governance'. Even the transgressive promise of the women's movement has been blunted by the discovery, mainstreaming and neutralization of gender by the very same institutions that prop up

economic and social policies that require the continued sacrifice of women's labour.

In Trinidad and Tobago, Gabrielle Jamela Hosein comments wryly that in some ways the limited successes of feminism in crossing some institutional barriers has led to greater ideological conservatism among a younger generation of women who shy away from identifying themselves as feminist<sup>7</sup>. She also notes that young women seem to draw on an individualistic language of self-respect and do not make sustained links between their experiences and the wider landscape in which such inequalities are embedded (Hosein, 2007). This is in a country that is home to the regional Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA)! We might well ask whether neo-liberal emphases on the self are being manifested in the ways in which responses to discontent are increasingly individualized and privatized.

These are the challenges that face activists today as we engage a new generation. I want to begin to think about this by suggesting that the status quo in the region is enabled by a deadening and deadly social amnesia which short-circuits the possibility of thinking otherwise. This is not to say there is no history in the present. Instead it is to question what we have come to accept as a legitimate narrative of how we arrived at this point, where the only change that we are told matters is the five year cycle when the votes are mobilised, the speeches and promises are made, a 'new' government is elected, the flag is raised, and business continues, more or less as usual. What we have in stock offers us this present we currently inhabit as our eternal future, and calls it independence.

But this is the opening of my conversation, not its dismal conclusion! Therefore, let us rewind, wheel and turn again as the Jamaicans would say. To start again with my grandmother, might there be another way of reading her short-term forgetfulness, in which we learn to listen to the early recounting of an ordinary

woman's everyday life? She worked as a domestic for thirteen years and was a single parent with one child, whom her brother helped to raise. In her later years she worked with her husband on the farm he managed on the Essequibo coast. It is a life that gets missed by the history books and officially managed narratives of the past, but which offers us a glimpse into another present, another future, lurking in the shadows. I suggest that there is a more hopeful and capacious angle of vision to be apprehended here.

It is a real honour to be speaking in a series named for Dame Nita Barrow, a woman with a truly regional outlook. I draw on three dimensions of her life to organize my reflections this evening, and as a way of participating in a process of remembering her<sup>8</sup>. She might not have agreed with everything I will say, but paying homage should always be in the interest of extending a conversation while recognizing its various origins. Otherwise there would never be anything to say.

The first is that the social geography of Dame Nita's personal and professional life gesture towards a Pan-Caribbean identity. In addition to Barbados, I am told that her family connections embraced St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Tobago and St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and she is described as having worked in almost every Caribbean territory (including, given our migration rates to the US, New York!). Secondly, she was a member (and the only woman) of a seven person Commonwealth team that visited South Africa in 1985 to witness the conditions faced by the Black majority and to offer recommendations for dialogue between the Botha regime and leaders of the anti-apartheid resistance. Thirdly, in 1985 she was convenor of the NGO Forum for the Decade of Women in Nairobi, Kenya. If the first two suggest themes – Caribbean movement and political conflict - to be taken up here, the third highlights Dame Nita's commitment to social justice and gender equality, and a sense that the terrain of politics requires expansion beyond a focus on state power, to include the myriad other domains in which the business of living is carried out, and where women can be found. Thus my lecture will explore, through a discussion

of xenophobia occasioned by migration and the politics of polarization and division, how a collective social amnesia has worked to effect the marginalization of Caribbean peoples. Looking at the operation of gender in each of these examples, I hope to suggest ways in which we might rework narratives of exclusion, through a preliminary discussion of counter-memories embedded in practices that do not follow the logic of borders, internally or externally imposed.

### **The Social Geography of a Pan Caribbean Identity**

Let me begin with recent Guyanese media coverage of trade and business links with Barbados. Reports of an official Barbadian delegation's successful visit to the trade and investment exhibition GUYEXPO were followed by the Government of Guyana's invitation to Barbadians to lease land at a reduced rate. This overture prompted a letter to the Guyanese newspapers which noted, "I also have not seen reciprocity; of course we have a big heart and a bench at Grantley Adams International."<sup>9</sup> (Stabroek Daily News, October 24th, 2007).

The reference nudged an uncomfortable memory out of its hiding place. On July 19, 2005, I was at the Cheddi Jagan International Airport in Guyana with my two daughters, waiting to return to Toronto via Trinidad and Tobago. There was also a flight leaving for Barbados, and I recognized a few passengers. A few days later I learned that most of those individuals had never made it past what is dubbed "the Guyanese bench" at Grantley Adams airport. I believe over two score were deported in one day. Thinking about this event in preparation for this lecture, I realized I had no idea how the mass deportation was dealt with in the Barbadian public sphere. Curious, I decided to search the online national newspaper archives. Two hours later I had filled sixty pages with columns, letters and editorials, dating back over two years (the internet blogs are another matter altogether).

While the importance of a constructive and open dialogue can never be underestimated, I was stunned by the vitriol against Guyanese in much of what I was reading. Words like flood and swamp suggested that Barbados was vulnerable and open to invading hordes (the gendered dimension is clear here) who threatened the country's social equilibrium, notwithstanding statements by the Barbadian government that the numbers of Guyanese in the country could not support such a conclusion.

In letters to the press, images emerged of squatting and overcrowding (the dirty, anti-social Guyanese), of illegal access to scarce social services and free medical care (the duplicitous and greedy Guyanese), of threats to law and order (the criminal Guyanese), of a political imbalance, with at least one opposition politician speculating that the voters' list could be artificially inflated (the cheating Guyanese), of immigrants accepting lower wages and undercutting Barbadian labour (the Guyanese scab). Indian-Guyanese were singled out and racialised as particularly incapable of integrating, and of threatening to import Guyana's 'ethnic' problem into the island.

Anxieties around borders also turned crucially on questions of sexuality. In some of the online blogs, women were singled out as preying on unsuspecting Barbadian men in order to get themselves legalised (the immoral and sexually loose Guyanese). The Barbadian prostitute was even momentarily 'rehabilitated' in order to make the argument that she was put out of business near the garrison by Guyanese women willing to do more for less. Given what we know throughout the region about the general association in the public imagination between prostitution and moral decay - even as sex workers are integral to the tourist industry and therefore to regional economies (Kempadoo, 1999).

This calling up of the local prostitute to defend the Barbadian nation perfectly illustrates the feminist point that women are the grounds on which claims to community are made which ultimately displace them, which is to say at the end of the day it is not really about women and the inequalities they experience at all. That sexuality is one of the fulcra on which this controversial conversation has pivoted should not surprise us. Concerns about immigration are always simultaneously concerns around reproduction, and one can point to numerous other examples in the region and beyond of this kind of policing of the allegedly pure national body from contamination or penetration by the Other. Many Haitian children born in the Dominican Republic to Haitian parents are ineligible for public services (including education) because they are not entitled to identity papers; nor does having one Dominican parent necessarily guarantee such security. In this case we see how state regulations attempt to circumscribe and reorder people's lives in the name of something called 'Dominican national identity'.

By denying or refusing to recognize the myriad unscripted ways in which people chance upon, live and love each other, different categories of belonging are created, rendering some families less normal or less valued. This is similar, by the way, to how we tend to think of households headed by women as secondary to the nuclear/male breadwinner family, despite the fact that they represent the family experience of over 40 per cent of children in the region, or the laws that outlaw lesbian and gay sex and make criminals and non-citizens out of all of us whose desires refuse to be strai(gh)tjacketed (Alexander, 1997; Robinson, 2006).

My kids have come to Barbados on several occasions (my father made this his home between 1997 and 2004), and I am fortunate to be able to take them to Guyana each year to instil in them an understanding of their rich heritage. And yet, wading through this material, I could not help feeling that this belonging was somehow precarious, that the Caribbean I was claiming could also impose its own cruel exclusions. And I wonder, had we been on the plane to Barbados that day, how would my children have made sense of the interminably long lines and the distress that must have been on the faces of many Guyanese?

Given the contemporary economic disparities between Barbados and Guyana, the direction of the traffic is predictable. At the same time, I want to suggest that in several of the press reports, the spotlight on Guyanese appeared to obscure a disquiet and displace another conversation about the internal distribution of resources. That is to say, Bajans may have been represented in this discourse as the haves and Guyanese as the have-nots who threaten the real citizens' high standard of living, but this projected image of a unified national community cannot always paper over the inequalities that generate divisions among Barbadians, for which immigrants should not be scapegoated and cannot be asked to answer.

I have begun with Barbados because this is where we are this evening, and not because there is anything peculiarly Barbadian about this pattern. We need to move past defensiveness and address the wider context, in order to engage each other. Across the region, one can point to numerous other cases, like the widely documented brutal treatment of Haitian sugar workers in the Dominican Republic. If we cast our net even wider, we begin to see that what takes place in the region is not so different from what Caribbean people – in different ways – face 'up North', 'in foreign'. Research has shown how movement is regulated at various points to respond to the differently gendered needs and demands of global capitalism. Take for example the domestic, seasonal hotel and temporary farm worker programmes that recruit Caribbean women and men as workers to Canada and the United States, all of which are based on a presumption that while the workers' labour is required to produce value, their own lives are treated as worthless, and their families and the costs of social reproduction must remain as far as possible outside the borders of the host country. These jobs are gendered, with women doing the feminised (hotel and maid) and men the masculinised (agricultural) work. This is in a context in which both kinds of jobs have little status and have become associated with immigrants, non-citizens, and people of colour<sup>10</sup>.

These types of policies and societal attitudes send the message that we can treat some people differently because they are not one of us, notwithstanding the reality that it is the largely invisible and exploited labour of these so-called 'others' that creates and maintains the scaffolding of the destination economies, a point that was beautifully made in relation to the Barbados-Guyana saga by Prime Minister Owen Arthur.<sup>11</sup> Instead of seeing the immigrant as the problem, we might usefully ask ourselves how immigrant labour, and particularly female immigrant labour, serves an economy geared so heavily to the tourist industry, and the benefit their tenuous legal status provides to employers. This is the integral underbelly of capitalist development-what is popularly called globalization today. Moreover, I am sure that anyone in the Caribbean could recount a story of a family member or friend enduring humiliating treatment at ports of entry in Miami, New York, London or Toronto. When we look at how we handle our own affairs in relation to visitors and workers from other Caribbean countries, should the similarities not give us pause? There should be nothing comfortable in such familiarity.

In an interview, literary scholar Gordon Rohlehr offers the opinion that nationalism necessarily requires and offers little sympathy to the stranger, and that in the aftermath of the collapse of the West Indies Federation, in each country that went its separate – national – way, “the Other became the other Caribbean person” (Puri 2003: 253). With CARICOM discussions over freedom of movement and the Single Market and Economy, what do these popular anxieties over borders tell us about the tensions between the local and the global, the regional and the resolutely, at times xenophobically, national?

The stories we tell ourselves are based on a kind of collective amnesia. It suits us today, for instance, to see Haiti not as the country that gave the world the promise of Black sovereignty over two centuries ago, but as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It suits us today to see Guyana as lowest on the totem pole of the Anglophone Caribbean, notwithstanding the fact that at one point it was seen as the breadbasket of the Caribbean and potentially still has

that capacity. Guyana represents also our gateway to deeper relations with our Latin American neighbours and a broader regional vision. Caribbean people would do well to challenge this selective forgetting.

For starters, we forget that the movement of people between countries ebbs and flows and changes direction. In a presentation to the Association of Caribbean Historians 9th Annual Conference, held thirty years ago at Cave Hill, Walter Rodney (1977) reminded us of a reverse wave in the late nineteenth century, when Barbadians, facing what many saw as limited opportunities on the island, headed to Guyana to seek their futures<sup>12</sup>. In a newspaper article, Deputy Prime Minister Mia Mottley<sup>13</sup> noted that the exodus was perceived to be so great that the Barbadian House of Assembly debated whether restrictions should be placed on those seeking to leave (Barbados Nation News, August 9, 2006).

Historicizing current anti-immigrant sentiment is also necessary to short-circuit an unhelpful Guyanese moral triumphalism or self-righteous indignation (at one point we helped you, and this is how you repay us). We see, with some humility, how we are all potentially complicit, how Guyanese have been equally capable of the behaviour we complain about today (in fact, there are similar rumblings of disquiet today in Guyana about the increasing numbers of Brazilians in the country). The impulse to make common political cause through the shared exploitation faced by local Blacks, indentured Indians, and Barbadian estate labourers was often tempered by anti-immigrant feelings, which came to the fore in times of economic distress.

In one report, Barbadians were being threatened “because [they] work more and at a lower rate than [the Creoles] do” (Royal Gazette 1868, cited in Rodney 1977). And Reverend Bronkhurst observed in 1883 that “...Every Hindu, every Badian, every islander is an abomination unto the Creole blacks of the Colony” (Bronkhurst 1883, cited in Rodney 1977). Here we see how an

immigration system designed to thwart the aspirations and cripple the bargaining power of the Afro-Guyanese working-classes in the post-slavery period would pit those who occupied the most marginal positions in Guyanese society against each other.

If we extend this analysis to the contemporary situation in Barbados, we might want to think about how those on the margins of Barbadian society – both citizens and immigrants from other Caribbean countries – come up against each other, while a larger social and economic arrangement that has produced the kinds of privations that generate inequalities, as well as the actors who benefit from these hierarchies – “unscrupulous employers, landlords, service providers” – are let off the hook, and remain unaccountable (CAFRA 2006).

Gordon Rohlehr, describing the Caribbean as “a society of immigrants” (Puri 2003: 248), notes the presence of Grenadians, Vincentians and Barbadians in Trinidad and Tobago from the late nineteenth century. Anti-immigrant sentiment – again this peaked under conditions of economic hardship - expressed itself through the popular medium of calypso; one of the songs in the early 1940s was titled ‘Small Island, Go Back Where you Really Come From’. Stereotypes also cohered around the Barbadian as mean, smart and a trickster, with the accent definitively branding the small islander as a permanent outsider. Rohlehr cites a calypso sung by Blakey in the 1950s, *Send Them Back*, in which the Grenadians’ inability to pronounce ‘box’ the ‘Trini’ way, gives them away to the authorities.

This business of language and enunciation denotes social status and sets the boundaries of difference, sometimes in exceedingly violent ways. Across the same Caribbean Sea, tens of thousands of Haitian women, men and children were massacred and evicted from the Dominican Republic in 1937 under the Trujillo regime. In *Farming of the Bones*, novelist Edwidge Danticat recalls the ritual use of the herb parsley, folded seamlessly into the cycle of collective Haitian life:

We used pesi, perejil, parsley, the damp summer morningness of it, the mingled sprigs, bristly and coarse, gentle and docile all at once, tasteless and bitter when chewed, a sweetened wind inside the mouth, the leaves a different taste than the talk, all this we savored for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides of old aches and griefs, to shed a passing year's dust as a new one dawned, to wash a new infant's hair for the first time and – along with boiled orange leaves – a corpse's remains one final time. (Danticat 1998: 62).

This reassuring depth is brutally eviscerated when parsley threatens to betray Haitian-ness. In the final section of the novel, which addresses the massacre, whether one was killed or left to live turned on one's ability to pronounce parsley with a Dominican Spanish accent (as opposed to one contaminated by Haitian Kreyol), in which the attackers listened for “the trill of the r or the precision of the j” as signs of the authentic native speaker, fluent in the mother tongue (Danticat 1998: 193).

One wonders whether it is ever really possible to definitively identify, expel and obliterate the Haitian. Or is the categorical violence of such acts required to erase and deny the interwoven complexities of Haitian-Dominican relations on the ground? Moreover, it is the Haitian whose multilingual competence (in at least Spanish and Kreyol) offers a tentative promise of neighbourliness, but this matters little when the need to find the stranger among us is so deeply compelling. These are disturbing reminders, more troubling still because they continue to resonate across place and time.<sup>14</sup>

In her recently published memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), Danticat's eighty year old, sick Haitian uncle, with a valid US tourist visa, is held at the Krome Detention Centre in Miami, where he eventually collapses and later dies. His

earthly remains were interred in New York, making him “part of the soil of a country that had not wanted him” (Danticat 2007: 251). Distressed, Danticat's dying father observes, in a comment that encapsulates the tragedy of Haiti, a country that gave the world an early lesson in freedom from racial intolerance and where Black people today continue to pay the price for that courage, “He shouldn't be here...If our country were ever given a chance and allowed to be a country like any other, none of us would live or die here” (Danticat 2007: 251).

### **Caribbean Movements and Political Conflict**

While remembering can enable us to historicize contemporary exclusions and recognize our own ‘implicatedness,’ it can also serve a more hopeful purpose. If we start with the gendered lives and survival strategies of women and men, their uneven circulation and mobility stitch the Caribbean together in ways that make it impossible to insist on separability over connection. The fact that earlier migration patterns tended to be heavily male<sup>15</sup> should not distract us from thinking about where the women went and what they did. For while many remained to take care of those left behind when their menfolk departed (bringing to mind the folk song, ‘brown skin gal, stay home and mind baby, I goin’ away on a sailin’ boat an’ if ah don’t come back, throw ‘way de damn baby’), women also extended their lives into new geographies.

In some cases they were responding to official labour schemes like the domestic worker programmes in Canada, while in other instances they travelled as individuals and in staggered form as members of wider family units. Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando's documentary, *My Footsteps in Baragua*, captures the importance of women to organizing and reproducing community in these destinations. The oldest migrant is a Barbadian octogenarian, fluent in Spanish and at home in Baragua. Despite having left Barbados more than sixty years ago, she says wistfully and with clear Bajan intonations, “I would like to go home

yes". It is a community, moreover, in which gendered intimacies blur national differences, for every family featured in the film contains members who can track their ancestry to different islands – Barbados, Trinidad, Grenada and so on. Food (peas and rice, coo coo, ackee and saltfish), the preparation of which remains women's work, also emerges as a key element of cultural memory and inter-generational transmission.

It would be folly to assume a straightforward gendered divide in which women's contributions related to cultural transmission and the space of the household, while men's occupied what is often rendered as the more encompassing space of the political. There is also a problem in not seeing the work that women do in the family as political, or relegating it somehow – and usually as afterthought – to the secondarily political, a point we shall return to later. We know something of migrant men's activism in such destinations as Panama and Costa Rica, and there is interest in tracking whether and how this shaped later labour struggles as they returned to the Anglophone Caribbean.

As Merle Collins writes in *Tout Moun ka Pléwé (Everybody Bawling)*, a beautiful meditation that ties the cycles of tropical storms and hurricanes to Grenada's political history:

...hurricane forming right inside Grenada self, hurricane coming back from other Caribbean country too, from Aruba, from Trinidad, from America, from England, from all the places Grenadian people go to get a little pankwai (a little something) when things get rough. Is not now Grenadians, and in fact, all Caribbean people, going out and coming back (Collins 2007: 5).

Labour leaders and activists in the different islands also frequently originated from somewhere else (one well-known female example that we know about is Elma Francois, originally from St. Vincent, in Trinidad (Reddock 1988)).

And the diasporic turn in the academy has unearthed for us the myriad roles played by Caribbean men in all kinds of struggles, from the Garveyite movement to Pan-Africanism. We need more work like this that refuses to be disciplined by a narrowly nationalist frame, but we would also do well to extend and recast what does exist by asking different questions of the material. For instance, what kinds of community did these men envision, and how did the terms of belonging address differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation?<sup>16</sup> We should also explore the ways in which women emerge as complex political actors in their own right.

There are some examples that point us in this direction: Women in the Garveyite movement, some of whom had relocated to the Caribbean from the United States; Francophone Caribbean women's participation in Pan-Africanism in Paris (Edwards 2003); Claudia Jones, feminist, communist and Black internationalist with an articulate critique of how race, class and sex intersected under capitalism and who was firmly committed to putting Blacks and women on the agenda of the communist party. She migrated to the United States from Trinidad and Tobago at age nine, never returning to the region (one account of her life suggests a Barbadian paternal lineage), and was deported (she used the term exiled) to England for her communist affiliations, where she launched the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News* and also helped create what we know today as London's Notting Hill Carnival.

She was part of a generation of West Indians in diaspora committed to a truly independent Caribbean, and whose insistent presence (the Caribbean as witness, we might call it) testified to the ways in which the contours of British identity were fundamentally shaped by empire (Boyce-Davies 2003). As one text

suggests, "...to be West Indian, in this sense, was a strategy to live with the dislocations imposed by migration" (Schwarz 2003: 16). Dying prematurely at age 49, her grave sits beside and fittingly, as a soon to be published book points out, to the left of Karl Marx in Highgate cemetery, with the inscription, "valiant fighter against racism and imperialism who dedicated her life to the progress of socialism and the liberation of her own Black people" (Boyce-Davies 2008).

### **Naturally Caribbean: Movement not Borders**

Surely the lesson here is that it is a futile exercise to think of each country as separate if we were to take these trajectories seriously. Instead, what we see are social, economic, political and cultural transnational encounters that connect and go beyond the region as well as give each country its unique stamp. In her challenge to traditional push-pull frameworks, geographer Elizabeth Thomas-Hope describes Caribbean migration as having 'generated its own dynamic with its own element of freedom' (Thomas-Hope 1992: 165).

It is an inescapable part of our sensibilities, of who we are. It seems to me, then, that it is movement and not borders which is naturally Caribbean, by which I mean it is a continuously defining element of our collective historical experience and memory. We are caught between nationalist preoccupations that require the design and management of policies regulating the flow of people across the region, and another plane of reality that confounds this logic on a daily basis, that illustrates how "...particular historical and structural conditions have produced cultural predispositions toward imagining community in global terms and enabled a matching cultural circuitry for building translocal images" (Carnegie 2002: 80).

This is of course most obvious today in the unofficial intra-regional 'people' networks, perhaps best embodied in the trader, whose symbolic red, white and

blue striped bag at the airport counter has become an instantly recognizable accessory. Mainly in response to the food bans imposed with no consultation and little preparation in the 1980s in the name of growing and buying local under co-operative socialism in Guyana, it was women who, with men and ahead of men, trekked in and out of the country by plane, boat and overland, who endured numerous hassles at border points as well as harassment and even imprisonment for trading in what were deemed contraband goods.

These women bargained with their bodies and whatever else they had, and contributed to an informal economy that kept households fed and going in the lean years. As one opposition news-sheet at the time noted, "What we are seeing in the small traders' struggle is the most effective civil disobedience campaign ever carried out for such a long period in Guyana" (Open Word, 15, No. 41, 1982). Carla Freeman (2000) paints a picture of Barbadian women in the data-processing export sector who supplement their income by making short trips to Miami and Puerto Rico for items that they mark up and sell at home.

Charles Carnegie draws our attention to the central role played by women in inter-regional agricultural trade. He urges a starting point that would reckon with these itinerant, everyday activities that transgress national boundaries as a matter of course, commenting that "...women's transborder activities are institutionalized and routine – very much part of settled island life" (Carnegie 2002: 84). From Guyana to Suriname, St. Lucia to Martinique and Guadeloupe, Barbados to Puerto Rico, there is a way in which we can also read these actions as a form of popular regionalism not circumscribed by linguistic divisions.

I find it ironic<sup>17</sup> that so much of the pronouncements emanating from CARICOM on freedom of movement under the CSME have emphasized 'skilled labour.' This is a definition that surely excluded these women while misrecognising not only the skill involved, but the centrality of their work in sustaining regional economies. One study concludes that targeting skilled workers results in an

“elitist common market” that “effectively alienates the majority of persons living in this region from what should perhaps be a fundamental right within an economic community” (Wickham et al. 2004).

It is also important to think about the ways in which gender and class intersect in relation to these provisions. Given the high percentage of female graduates from UWI since the late 1980s, they potentially benefited from the freeing up of skilled labour. Notably, however, teachers, nurses, domestic and hospitality workers, higglers and artisans were not among the first categories approved for freedom of movement. This is so even though they represent precisely those women who, as Guyanese activist Andaiye has contended, have long made the Caribbean a single economic space<sup>18</sup>; as Norman Girvan notes, the practice is another matter entirely.<sup>19</sup>

There is much press given these days to the Caribbean Single Market and Economy, and of course we hope that some genuine semblance of this will occur more than three decades after the establishment of the regional movement. But ask any woman who trades regularly and informally what the CSME means to her, and I am sure we will get a sense of the distance between the decisions taken by trade ministers in closed rooms and those who continue to face the hassles of making livelihoods at the grassroots. Norman Girvan (2007) aptly comments that “integration has become a matter of economics, more correctly of business, and a matter for ministers, officials and businessmen. Political involvement, popular involvement, is missing”.<sup>20</sup> At a meeting I attended in early November 2007 in Barbados, Ruth Blackman, Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Social Transformation and Gender Affairs in Barbados, observed that there has been little attention to, and popular discussion of, the social implications/ramifications of the CSME, and specifically, of the freedom of movement provisions.

## Geographies of Desire and Belonging

As we know, the antecedents to these contemporary border crossers are the Caribbean higgler/hucksters/traders (rechristened in the academy and policy circles as informal commercial importers), whose innovative practices can be traced to early desires for autonomy in relation to the slave plantation economy. This wellspring of tradition continues to be drawn upon and renewed, even in ways that are connected to, but located outside of, the Caribbean proper. Consider this example, for which the traveling bus is both a literal dimension of experience as well as an apt metaphor of Caribbean itineraries: It is a brisk Fall evening. Buses pull up at a strip mall in Toronto, Canada. Groups of predominantly women and some children mill around; as one draws closer one hears the unmistakable cadence of island talk, island accents. Welcome to international travel, Caribbean style. These chartered 'tours', advertised by word of mouth and weekly advertisements in community newspapers, are mainly organized by Caribbean women. For half the price of the official services which leave from the downtown Dundas Street terminal, you can catch a bus from Toronto and its suburbs which leaves on Friday night, deposits weary Caribbean travelers eleven hours later on the pavements of Church Avenue, Brooklyn, and returns them on Monday in time for the rhythms of a busy Toronto workweek. These travellers have a foot in *at least* three localities (Toronto, New York and the Caribbean).

Their frame of reference is multilayered, with different temporalities and seasons jostling for attention: Canadian and American holidays that fall on a long weekend; significant Caribbean events like the Labor Day carnival in New York; popular weekend day excursions to flea markets and shopping malls in upstate New York, Detroit and Pennsylvania. They travel to visit family and friends, attend celebrations, bury loved ones, patronize Caribbean businesses, hunt for bargains, engage in buying and selling (this is the Caribbean higgler reinvented across a North American borderland), 'take a break', in short to make lives for themselves as Caribbeans 'up North' (Trotz 2006).

It should come as no surprise that this informal cross-border traffic is female-dominated. Women tend to be the ones most involved in maintaining active kinship networks, as observed by literary theorist Carole Boyce Davies' description of her mother, which resonates with my own mother's life these days: 'She also lives in that in-between space that is neither here nor there, locating herself in the communities where her children, grandchildren, family and friends reside' (Boyce Davies 1994: 1). Years ago – and before it became a fashionable adjective – I came across an essay by Rosina Wiltshire Brodber on the transnational family in the Caribbean.

The fact that there continues to be such a strong association between the household and women's caring labour that maintains it, accounts partly for the dynamism of the bus charter operation. As one woman I spoke to pointed out, "Let me tell you why mostly women travel. Men...don't want to think women are very strategic with money. Women are. Because women know how to plan. Women know when to buy. Women know the deals and the quality. So women are more able, especially women who have families and children."

What we are faced with is a transnational support strategy for households stretched across at least three locations (international financial institutions have belatedly recognized the significance of remittances in undergirding economies ravaged by structural adjustment programmes). An IFAD<sup>21</sup> study released in October 2007 revealed that Caribbean migrants sent home over US\$8 billion in remittances 2006, (2007: 14). Their response appears to be to figure out ways of using people's popular responses to crisis<sup>22</sup> to further entrench neo-liberal policies. But that is another matter. One woman I know brought goods back for her home and to sell within her Toronto network. She also sets aside some for the barrel occupying a prominent and permanent place in her kitchen, and which, when full, would be sealed and dispatched to her family in the Caribbean, with another immediately taking its place.

I want to suggest that these women - the entrepreneurs who run the service as well as their clientele - present us with a familiar instance of lives that are sustained and nourished through the dynamics of crossing. They reference an incredible vibrancy that not only refuses to be confined to/in a single place, but that insists on inventing complex new geographies of desire and belonging. For a variety of reasons we could infer that the women do not return to the Caribbean (and indeed many have not taken a flight back to the region in years, or since they left), but such a conclusion depends on seeing the Caribbean narrowly as fixed co-ordinates on a map that correspond to territory and ocean. Again, borders loom, threatening to cut us off from each other, denying the lesson these women's journeys promise.

I want to suggest that these regularized trips, to Caribbean people in places other than the Caribbean and to Caribbean places outside of the region, are in fact a form of return, of weekly homage, to an idea of the Caribbean to which our travellers remain faithful. It is these women, unnoticed by most - except perhaps the border patrols, and do they not follow the same logic, whether they are in Buffalo, Port-of-Spain, Nassau, Miami? – who renew memory by extending a rich historical legacy into new terrain, and who continue to offer us a more expansive, connected and less jealously guarded map of this region that is our shared inheritance. As one woman said to me, “in my sleep, I dream in more than one place. Sometimes when I wake up, for a minute I don't know whether I in Toronto or Trinidad.”

### **Silencing the Past**

I want to shift register now, and mention some work that is just getting off the ground in Guyana by a women's group, Red Thread, of which I am a member, and which is organized in the first instance around gathering oral histories and other material relating to the racial disturbances that tore the country apart in

1964. We believe that the contemporary manifestations of inter-racial suspicion and fear which have intensified in the years following the return to electoral democracy in 1992<sup>23</sup>, can only be understood and addressed in the context of a deeper, historical rupture in Guyanese society that followed the dissolution, after 133 days in office, of the multi-racial, anti-colonial coalition that came to power in 1953 under the premiership of Dr. Cheddi Jagan. External intervention and covert destabilization by the British and Americans helped split the nationalist movement along racialised lines and would eventually result in the PPP's defeat by a coalition government in December 1964, an election that followed years of strikes, riots, and culminated in the explosion of brutal violence between African and Indian Guyanese on the coastal belt.

Little is said about this period these days, and what is uttered is cynically manipulated in the interest of one or the other of the two dominant political parties. One of the few novels that deals with this period, Grace Nichols' lyrical *Whole of a Morning Sky*<sup>24</sup> puts it thus,

No one knew how the beatings and killings started or who really started them first. The Indians blamed the black people. The black people blamed the Indians. And years later, when it was all over, both races liked to pretend it had never happened, or that it was some kind of dream ghost, best laid to peace and forgotten forever (Nichols 1986: 137).

There seems to be an overall investment in silencing the past. But the traces of 1964 are everywhere, infiltrating the interstices of everyday life and imprisoning our imaginations. The ghosts of that period do not merely haunt us, they overwhelm us. It is estimated that over 200 persons lost their lives, while thousands of families were displaced by the disturbances, forced to leave multi-ethnic communities, homes and friends they had grown up with, to seek refuge and rebuild shattered lives in neighbouring villages with others who they often

did not know, but were presumed to, simply because they 'looked like them'. Many left the country altogether, an outflow of people that has become a hemorrhage today. Division has been the legacy bequeathed to a post-1964 generation of Guyanese, and it is a division shorn of memory.

In interviews Red Thread has done so far, retellings detail collective terror: (the bombing of a launch on the Demerara river at Hurudaia, killing 43 African women, men and children, or the brutal assaults that led an entire Indian community to flee the mining town of Linden) as well as individual horror (an Indian child forced at gunpoint to kill his African foster mother who had cared for him since he was a child, or a family barely escaping with their lives from a predominantly African community they had resided in for years because the man's wife was Indian). Inter-racial violence was a productive act, by which I mean to say it was required to obliterate anything that contradicted the sense of African and Indian Guyanese as irrevocably different and separate. In one telling scene in Grace Nichol's novel, a dougla — someone of Black and Indian heritage — is attacked in the streets of Georgetown by two young men determined to "beat the coolie out ah yuh dougla rass" (Nichols 1986: 139).

This eruption of violence in the midst of dense networks of interdependence is not an unfamiliar theme when put in the context of political crises and their legacies elsewhere in the post-colonial Caribbean. The narrator in *Paint the Town Red*, Brian Meeks' fictional account of the political violence in 1980 that claimed some 800 lives in Jamaica, observes that, "so many webs had been intricately woven only to be casually torn apart" (Meeks 2003: 10).

In *Tout Moun ka Pléwé (Everybody Bawling)*, Merle Collins says of events leading up to the collapse of the Grenadian Revolution "...brother quarrelling with sister, with mother, friend quarrelling with friend, with father, country divided like we might think it was never divided before. Nobody say the word, not out loud in public, but was Civil War that creep up and establish itself. And that is why it so

hard to heal" (Collins 2007: 13). And in Haiti, fratricidal violence continues to claim lives on a daily basis, even as the mainstream media would have us believe that the removal of Aristide, orchestrated by the Canadians, French and Americans in 2004, making a mockery of the 200th anniversary of Haitian independence, has brought peace and stability to the country.

These intimacies make the violence somehow more unspeakable, perhaps because it is difficult to comprehend how the distance between neighbour and stranger could be so easy to traverse, how neighbours could become others in the blink of an eye. They also raise the issue of how women were affected. Most feminist work on violence in the Caribbean (in addition to organizing around the structural violence of adjustment programmes and their impact on women as domestic shock absorbers) has tended to revolve around domestic violence.

These analyses offer, as Tracy Robinson (n.d.) observes, an important, and in many ways, straightforward platform around which women could readily mobilise. We have not paid enough attention to the gendering of political crises and violence across the region. This with the exception of Haiti, where we have Beverley Bell's (2001) collection of testimonies from survivors and witnesses, not victims (this is no semantic distinction), gathered shortly after the restoration of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1994.

We also have as well as Human Rights and other reports that have clearly established how sexual assault is extensively used as a political weapon against Haitian women and girls.

In the case of Guyana, both in the scholarly literature as well as in popular discourse, there has been virtually no discussion of how women and men differentially experienced the racial disturbances of 1964. Part of this, of course, has to do with a conceptual/political frame that does not foreground questions of gender, but it should be key, given that whole communities and families were

reconfigured. One of the issues we must contend with is whether and how women were sexually assaulted because this was construed as an attack on the communities with which they are identified, as well as a direct affront to the masculinity of those presumed to protect them from harm.

Silence and denial, however, can also be shame's legacy. It can be difficult to find out or talk about sexualized inter-racial assaults because it is the woman whose reputation is at stake, even (or especially) more than 40 years following the horrific events of 1964. The pressure to be silent comes from within and without. Merle Collins' poem *Shame Bush* captures this poignantly '...touch shame bush/ see how it curl inside itself/ Watch shame bush/ see how it close to defend itself/ Study shame bush, if you really do that reading/ you will understand the silence people keeping' (Scott 2007).

Silence, however, is not akin to forgetting. There is no wiping of the slate clean here. In the absence of a ritual cleansing, the events and their diffuse aftermath can be neither legislated nor wished away. As Collins reminds us,

Dust don't disappear when you sweep it behind bed/ People stay quiet but all the questions in their head/ Is true time could heal and bad times could change people mind/ But we have to figure how to talk, leave the hurt behind/' (Merle Collins *Shame Bush*).

There have been recent discussions of how to break the awful grip of a deafening silence, or when it is occasionally interrupted, of renderings of the past that intensify internecine resentments and divides.

Brian Meeks (2007) calls for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in relation to the political battles between the PNP and JLP in Jamaica in 1980 which primarily took the lives of poor people in urban garrison communities, but

if we look at the examples of Grenada (where a TRC was established in 2001, (Scott 2007) and Haiti (where a National Truth and Justice Commission was set up in December 1994), we see that these commissions have, for different reasons, resolved little.

### **The Antidote to Silencing**

How, then, to inaugurate a necessary conversation? For visionary poet Martin Carter, forgetting is an impossibility, but remembering is not straightforward and can be harnessed to new beginnings or dangerous ends:

It remains possible to glimpse morning/  
Before the sun;/  
Possible to see too early/  
Where sunset might stain anticipated/  
Night. So sudden, and so hurting/  
Is the bitten tongue of memory (Martin Carter, *In the When Time*: 1977).

In the case of Guyana, if domestic violence was an issue around which women could easily organise, here we are confronted with the ways in which women identify as members of ethnic communities, deeply invested in narrative frames filtered through the contemporary racial impasse such that 'the other side' is always the aggressor. There is no automatic solidarity – if ever there was – of women *qua* women here in the face of violence. Not surprisingly, this is in keeping with the position of the two main political parties implicated in the 1964 events, with their exclusive roll call of martyrs, and where the only thing they share is a tiresome investment in victimhood that would place the blame entirely on the other. In a region that has experienced Amerindian exploitation, slavery

and indentureship, how is it that we have acquiesced so willingly to this ownership and division of the dead by an opportunistic political class?

I remember when I was a child, my father told me that in his trips to the interior, he had learned from Amerindian communities that quite often the antidote to a poisonous plant would be growing right next to it. You just had to know where to look. In the interviews we have done so far, and without exception, next to each story of tragic separation there have been glimpses of something else: the intense fear felt on both sides of the created divide; individual accounts of cross-racial solidarity; families sheltering families; women sharing news and food with each other as mothers and as caregivers; children refusing to segregate themselves from their playmates; elderly women and men emotionally expressing a desire and longing for the homes they were evicted from, and for the networks of interdependence that were so brutally torn apart more than 40 years ago.

In *Whole of a Morning Sky*, women organize an entire yard – predominantly Black residents - in a low-income community to keep vigil following the news that the home of the single Indian family who lives among them will be the site of an arson attack (Nichols 1986). As one woman notes, “I bet you if men used to bring children into this world, they would have more respect for human life” (Nichols 1986: 139). I read this not as a statement of women’s innate propensity for peace as mothers, but rather as a call for recognition of the implicitly political and potentially transformative dimensions of the caring work that is the foundation of all our societies, but which is unequally apportioned and not recognized.

Along similar lines, and drawing on her research with one community in downtown Kingston, Jamaica, Faye Harrison (1997) suggests that even as political polarization was deepening, from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, one could find efforts by local women and men to draw on woman-centred

practices that created safe zones of yard and community, challenged representations of militarized masculinity valorized in the gunman culture, and foregrounded the structural violence of poverty and marginalization that framed the lives of grassroots women and men.

These openings raise a number of questions. In the case of Guyana, in 1898 a Royal Commission of Inquiry concluded of Afro-and Indo-Guyanese: "They are totally different people; they do not intermix. That is, of course, one of our great safeties in the colony when there has been any rioting."<sup>25</sup> This assumption of a ready-made difference completely erased the role of the colonial state in organizing and creating divisions among the working population in the interest of maintaining acceptable levels of sugar production in the post-emancipation period. The continuities of colonialist modes of thinking, expressed today in a widespread acceptance that Guyanese are irrevocably racially divided, are deeply troubling. What are the contemporary political stakes of keeping counter-memories submerged? Why is it that some stories are more easily forgotten than others, and who benefits from their continued disappearance?

As we see it in *Red Thread*, the challenge for Guyanese (and by extension other parts of the Caribbean that are struggling with their pasts in this way) is to bear witness while recognizing that the victim and the oppressor jostle for space inside each of us. Only when we arrive at a place where we can properly mourn and recognize those touched by the tragic events of 1964 in Guyana, 1980 in Jamaica (and we can add to this list), not as mine or yours, but as *our* collective responsibility, can we hope to defeat the narrow divide and rule logic that has for the most part resulted in an inability to collectively challenge the ongoing marginalization of the majority of our people.

Anthropologist George Mentore, who has worked for over 25 years with the Wai Wai community in Southern Guyana near the Brazilian border, recently wrote a column for the Guyanese *Stabroek* newspaper (Mentore 2007). Reflecting on

the growing numbers of homeless people on the streets of the capital city, he observed that homelessness does not exist in Amerindian society because there is no ethic or value that could result in “the distress of loneliness”. What he was saying, in effect, was that the answer – he prefers to call it the gift of sociality - to this most visible face of poverty and marginality is already here, awaiting our recognition and acceptance.

Migration and political violence, the themes I have addressed, represent two instances in which, through our practices, we have created the stranger at the doorstep and in our midst. We might think that the stranger helps to reinforce a sense of who ‘we’ are, but if we continue to go down this road, it will not be too long before the stranger takes up permanent residence inside each of us.

## **Conclusion**

### **Caribbean Community and the Gift of Sociality**

The Wai Wai offer us a most instructive lesson with which I want to begin to draw these reflections to a close. They show us that there are a few places in the Caribbean where we remain each other’s keepers, where there is no homelessness, no loneliness, only the company of neighbours. As The Mighty Gabby says,

Brother Stalin it's so nice to see/  
Trini-Bajan-Guyanese unity/  
We love for this region is so strong  
From Jamaica come all the way down/  
Every man from the islands me brother/  
Every girl from the islands me sister/

And I am sure forever it will remain this way/

Sans Humanite. Mighty Gabby and Black Stalin *Santimanite*  
1994.

That is the tentative promise of faith, love and possibility in the midst of a difficult, what many might say is a most impossible, situation.

Indian historian Urvashi Butalia points out that “the exploration of memory can never be separated from the ethics of such an exploration” (Butalia 2000: 289). She notes that, “In any such exploration of the past, the aspects we choose to illuminate are determined not only by the present we live in, but the future we wish to work towards” (Butalia 2000: 278). These are never neutral exercises. There is another lesson here if we are to nurture the capacity among our young people to put together alternative maps of the past that can speak to our present predicament, and generate sovereign and connected futures.

That the Wai Wai constitute a group that continues to be made invisible by Guyanese coastal anxieties and preoccupations does not render them insignificant. The fact that *they* are the ones who hold the gift of sociality suggests that it is we who need to unlearn particular ways of seeing, and to think of the answers that are present among us, indigenous in the sense that they have been created out of the terrain of multiple histories and struggles and answer to a Caribbean rhythm. It is not only to believe that there is always something that can be done, but that we must begin by looking to see what people are already doing. This is the ongoing work that exists, but which remains largely invisible and under-valued. Undoing this is key and has implications for how we might see ourselves in relation to others, and define our political goals.

For instance, as a tertiary educated, professional woman holding both Guyanese and Canadian citizenship, I can move pretty freely throughout the Caribbean. Most women, however, cannot take travel so easily for granted

despite the fact that they have consistently and against the odds knitted the region together through their informal cross-border economic activities. How does starting with their lives throw into relief the ways in which class works as privilege and also as a mode of differentiation between women? What does it demand of me as a feminist, and how might it recast the priorities of something I might want to call a women's organization or women's movement? What does it mean to be accountable and relevant to the present?

Beginning with the lives of grassroots women is, I would contend, a political imperative, and not because one has some romantic notion that this vantage point offers transparent or unmediated access to the real. We saw this most clearly in the second example of political violence where women identify as members of racialised groups or political parties in ways that make them complicit with the exclusions and acts of violence that are executed in their name.

A couple of points follow from this observation. Firstly, that gender (how we come to an understanding of ourselves as women and men) cannot be divorced from the other relations of race, class, sexuality, nation, ability, age etc., through which we organize and apprehend our lives. Secondly, interdependencies among us do not translate into egalitarian relationships. We have to work on that. Thirdly, in an age of neo-liberalism, where freedom has been narrowed to valorize the disconnected individual, it is important to remember that it has been collective struggles (such as the labour riots of the 1930s) that have helped to secure democratic spaces and rights for Caribbean peoples (Bolland 1995; Reddock 1994). Identifying possibilities that draw on other kinds of popular histories, as I have tried to do in this analysis, is not enough. It will take ongoing work to name and build on counter-narratives, memories, and daily practices that invisibly sustain us, to multiply them in order to expand the space of the political into a vision for peace and economic and social justice in the Caribbean and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

In his Nobel prize acceptance speech, Derek Walcott affirms the transformative power of the everyday, where resides

“... the beginnings of poetry, the grace of effort. In the hard mahogany of woodcutters: faces, resinous men, charcoal burners; in a man with a cutlass cradled across his forearm, who stands on the verge with the usual anonymous khaki dog; in the extra clothes he put on this morning, when it was cold when he rose in the thinning dark to go and make his garden in the heights - the heights, the garden, being miles away from his house, but that is where he has his land - not to mention the fishermen, the footmen on trucks... (Walcott 1992).<sup>27</sup>

It is a compelling but partial vision, for it ultimately cannot encompass women. Barbadian novelist George Lamming tells us that

...labour and the social relations experienced in the process of labour constitute the foundations of culture...the way we see, the way we hear, our nurtured sense of touch and smell, the whole complex of feelings which we call sensibility, is influenced by the particular features of the landscape which has been humanized by our work... (Lamming 2004: 33).

Women's caring labour has been central to this process, and to the making of what we identify as Caribbean culture today.

I want to end, therefore, with a poem by Honor Ford-Smith (1996), *Aux-Leon Women*, written following a Women and Development workshop with a squatting community on the backlands of a banana estate in (Walcott's) St.

Lucia. This is no feminist invocation of the extraordinary; in fact, in a later poem by Ford-Smith, *A message from Ni* (Nanny, Maroon leader, rebel woman from Jamaica), the idea of the individual heroic female figure, unswerving in her purpose, is dispensed with:

How I prayed to be freed from what drove/ me on: they never  
mention that, or/ how close courage is to fear./ It was terror of  
terror that drove me on/ till it was all over and I heard/ I was Ni  
eye of change/ leadress pathfinder healer of the breach.<sup>28</sup>

*Aux-Leon Women* was written for a different time, and at one level can be read as a celebratory evocation of an easy solidarity.

Taken today, however, in these uncertain times, and in conjunction with the more faltering, ambivalent and at times stuttering tone of *Ni*, represented here not as singular leader but more as channel of her community's aspirations, I prefer to read it as offering to a new generation of feminists a lesson in accountable memory and a caution against assumptions of automatic affiliation. It is a testament to the business of living for women, which maps the circuits of global capitalism, registers the situated inequalities that underpin our lives, and recognizes not just the need for collectivities of practitioners, but the work (this is no romanticized vision), the difficult yet imperative labour it entails to practice engagement, to sustain commitment, to build alliances, to create alternative spaces of hope beyond the narrow and individuated horizons of the neo-liberal present, for a Caribbean that is big enough and compassionate enough to hold all of our differences, all of our desires, all of our dreams. I end with a poem, that anthem to the imagination and archive of memories, for as Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (1990) reminds us, the difference is not between fact and fiction, but between fact and truth.

*Aux Leon Women*  
Before the sunlight  
splits the dry rock  
their eyes open  
on coarse board walls and  
guttered  
government  
land  
mind set begins  
with stumbling over  
a sleeping child  
an animal immobile.

“catch up the fire/ scrape and grate the cassava/ carry the water  
(uphill)/ boil the tea/ the toloma/ beat the castor oil seeds/ wash  
clothes/ nurse baby/ soothe old lady/ weed garden/  
chop banana/ load banana/ carry it down the stony road/  
un cadeau pour Monsieur Geest.”

la lin coowee, coowee  
la solei joo baway  
(the moon runs  
it runs  
till the sun  
catches it)

“how much are the bananas today”/?/ the housewife said  
unbuttoning her coat/ laying down her string bag in the  
Islington shop/ hurry up there/ don’t have all day/ she added  
himself will be home soon and the tea not ready/ nothing  
changes/ only the prices rise/ Gimme a dozen a them/ bruised

lot you got here today”  
la lin coowee, coowee  
la soleil joo baway  
(the moon runs  
it runs  
till the sun  
catches it)  
scrape/boil/beat  
“sleep baby sleep  
father working far away  
he give me something I take it  
he give me nothing.....I take it”  
Aux Leon women  
This morning  
when the sunlight strikes  
the rock  
Let us sweep that old yard clean.  
Let us beat our quarrels into one voice  
with the rhythm of the hardwood pestle.  
Let us light our fires on this hillside  
so all the islands will see  
this labour is not free.  
Let us burn the sweet wood  
for its scent will fill the nostrils  
of the blind and deaf.  
listen  
(La solei coowee coowee  
la lin joo baway)

The stroke of a cutlass in water has no meaning

(La solei coowee coowee

la lin joo baway)

*Listen, a song –*

*a song is beginning*

*right here*

*among us.*

Honor Ford-Smith, Aux Leon Women 1996

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<sup>2</sup> Feminist M. Jacqui Alexander refers to this as the betrayal of the promise which found expression in her Trinidad in the lines 'Every creed and race finds an equal place'.

<sup>3</sup> What several observers refer to as a new moment of global empire.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s, the women's movement was one of the few places where there was an organized campaign against the impact of economic liberalization on households and women, see Barriteau 1996, Reddock 1988.

<sup>5</sup> For further information see, Jean-Christophe Dumont and Geroges Lamaitre: *Counting immigrants and expatriates in countries: A new perspective*. Paris: OECD, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> I read Caribbean newspapers online regularly, and am constantly amazed by how little coverage there is of what is going on right at our backdoor. We seem to really lack a hemispheric consciousness.

<sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence, November 7, 2007. 6.

<sup>8</sup> And also recognizing the debt I owe to a generation of women, many of whom continue their work in and out of the region to this day.

<sup>9</sup> Editor's note. Grantley Adams International is in Barbados.

<sup>10</sup> See Agnes Calliste (1989), M. Chancy (1997) Makeda Silvera (1989), and Deborah Thomas (2005). For a discussion of extra-regional emigration of teachers and nurses, see Linden Lewis (2003).

<sup>11</sup> Editor's note. Prime Minister Owen Arthur then leader of the Barbados Labour Party and the government, lost the general elections in Barbados on January 15th 2008. The new Prime Minister of Barbados is David Thompson leader of the Democratic Labour Party, and the new government administration.

<sup>12</sup> My grandmother's husband, for instance, was Kenneth Sobers, a common Barbadian surname if there ever was one!

<sup>13</sup> Editor's note. Mia Mottley is now Leader of the Opposition. The Barbados Labour Party she now heads lost the January 15th 2008 general elections to the Democratic Labour Party.

<sup>14</sup> There have since been several *en masse* deportations of Haitians from the Dominican Republic.

<sup>15</sup> In contrast to today, where women equal and at times even outnumber men in migration statistics, especially to the UK and North America.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Michelle Stephens (2005).

<sup>17</sup> But sadly not surprising, because again it confirms the ways in which women's work remains largely invisible and undervalued, even though on paper there has been official recognition as far back as the UN Conference on Women in 1985 to recognize and measure the significance of women's unpaid labour.

<sup>18</sup> And although in principle self-employed service providers, domestic workers, teachers and nurses are now free to move in principle.

<sup>19</sup> Personal correspondence, November 9th, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> This verse from the extempo calypso *Santimanite*, by the Mighty Gabby and Black Stalin (1994), captures this best: Caribbean massive now is de time/ To show dem leaders what is on your mind/ It is time dat dey come up wid a plan/ How to unite de whole Caribbean/ Year after year is de same ole ting/ Dey keepin' meeting after meeting/ Tell dem we want unity and we want it right away/ Sans Humanite (Thanks to Admiral Nelson of 94.7 FM radio in Barbados for the wonderful reference).

<sup>21</sup> International Fund for Agricultural Development.

<sup>22</sup> And we should be clear remittances are, by and large, a grassroots response.

<sup>23</sup> And which have been accompanied by violence following the 1997 and 2001 elections.

<sup>24</sup> Taken from a Martin Carter poem.

<sup>25</sup> P.P. 1898, L (C. 8656), Royal Commission, Appendix C, Vol. I, evidence of M.J.E. Tinne, 4 January 1897, q. 1082.

<sup>26</sup> Cecilia Green (2001: 68) puts this best: "We need to understand not only the commanding heights of the economy and its hegemonic force but also the nooks, crannies and living networks of the popular and domestic economy and its creative potential. I am not suggesting that with such understanding something magical will occur; politics (and a different kind of politics, in different arenas) has to be built, devised, strategised, organized according to its own logic, not just inferred. However, it is only on the basis of this understanding and the infrastructure it reveals that a politics of empowerment can be sturdily built". For an example of a life lived on the basis of such an understanding, see Rhoda Reddock's (2007) tribute to Clotil Walcott, one of the founders of the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) of Trinidad and Tobago. Also see Reddock (1988) on Elma Francois.

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent discussion of traditions of resistance and the reputation-respectability debate in Caribbean cultural studies, and the elaboration of an argument that foregrounds the quiet power of the everyday, drawing on intersections between the work of dub poets Jean 'Binta Breeze (ordinary mawnin' \_ and Mikey Smith, see Puri (2003).

<sup>28</sup> See Richard Drayton (2004).

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