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# Diversity, Difference and Caribbean Feminism: The Challenge of Anti-Racism:

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## Abstract

The Caribbean, as with other parts of the New World, has been shaped by racialized constructs since the beginning of its modern history in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Caribbean history is closely related to the emergence of modern racism, usually dated to the point of the encounter between Europe, Africa and the New World. Feminist scholars have contributed a great deal towards deconstructing the categories of 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'nation' and exposing their gendered character. Women, in particular, have been 'othered' in relation to each other and positioned as markers of "racial" 'ethnic and national difference. This paper analyses the changing ways in which feminist activists of the Anglophone Caribbean women's movement have addressed issues of 'race' and ethnicity. It examines how they have interacted, negotiated, and created alliances and coalitions or sought to challenge racialized hierarchies and divisions in their everyday praxis. The work of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century feminists of the Anglophone Caribbean is addressed: women who were conscious of their African/Indian heritage at a time of great European colonial power. It also explores the anti-racist work of feminist activists at the end of that century, in the very different context of Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana at the high point of the Caribbean Women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s.

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## Introduction

In her 2002 Lucille Mathurin-Mair lecture,<sup>1</sup> the Guyanese activist, Andaiye, stated:

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<sup>1</sup>Biennial Lecture hosted by the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, UWI, Mona Campus, Jamaica.

While feminism has defined itself as placing great store on inclusiveness, organized feminist politics in the region has not been inclusive. CAFRA for example has always been made up mainly of predominantly Afro-Caribbean women, with Indo-Caribbean women in a small minority and little or no connection with Indigenous women, the poorest in the region. Working-class women of all races/ethnic groups form another minority. The age range was and still is narrow. How is this better than what we opposed in the Left movement? In the form and practice of organising in the 1980s and later, we studiously ignored the power relations among women, thereby allowing us, women with more power (however defined) to dominate or exclude – consciously or not, deliberately or not, it does not matter.

I do not believe that we thought any further (I certainly did not) than the need for the autonomy of women from men. But in organizing, if we cut gender off from the other power hierarchies, that is if we work to end relations among women, while ignoring the power relations among women, we will not succeed in transforming the power relations between women and men because we are not aiming at the whole power structure, of which the power relations between women and men are only a part (Andaiye, 2002:11)

In this lecture, well-respected Guyanese activist accuses the contemporary Anglophone Caribbean women's movement of ignoring questions of 'race' and 'class' in its feminist work. In this she was echoing concerns already raised by Indo-Caribbean feminists such as Rawidda Baksh-Soodeen (1998) Nesha Haniff and others. It is also important bearing in mind the centrality of issues of 'race,' ethnicity and colour to Caribbean history and current Caribbean life and praxis, and given the centrality of class to the radical politics of the 1970s and 1980s from which many of the feminist activists of that period emerged. This statement by Andaiye provides the opportunity for Caribbean feminist scholars and activists to reflect on her claims and possibly learn from these reflections. In this article, I focus particularly on the issue of feminist organising around 'race' which was central to the arguments in her presentation.

First, the term 'race' is in need of clarification. It is a complex term which, despite the recognition of its conceptual limitations, continues to be used in social analysis and everyday discourse. It is used here to refer to socially constructed groupings differentiated by phenotype, physical features and area of origin. Rather than focus on a static phenomenon called 'race,' however, scholars refer to the dynamic process of racialization – the process “where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities (R. Miles 1989: 74, cited in Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992:11). Yet notions of 'race' continue to be among the most pervasive and powerful bases of ethnic division, conflict and inequality. 'Race' by itself or combined with religion is also recognised as a powerful basis of social identity. In this article I do not deconstruct the term 'race,' but use it as it appears in historical and contemporary discourse to construct and demarcate different groups in Caribbean society.<sup>2</sup> I take 'ethnicity' to refer to relationships among collectivities based on religion, phenotype, culture or nationality. These characteristics are seen as distinctive and used to signify

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<sup>2</sup> 'Race' has also been recognised internationally as a contemporary global construct, as evidenced by the recently held World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in 2001.

difference in relation to other collectivities. In the Caribbean, ethnicity is often used interchangeably with race and ethnic difference may cohere around differences of phenotype and historical origin; religion and “culture”.

The Caribbean, along with other parts of the New World, has been shaped by racialized constructs since the beginning of its modern history in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Indeed Caribbean history is closely related to the history of racism itself, and the emergence of modern racism is usually dated at the point of the encounter between Europe, Africa and the New World.<sup>3</sup> European conquest of the region, the introduction of forced labour systems leading to the eventual decimation of the indigenous peoples, the establishment of the modern slave trade and enslavement of Africans, the importation of bonded labour of Asian and other nationalities were all justified by a Eurocentric discourse of natural racial and cultural superiority. Notions of racial superiority and inferiority were supported by European-derived rigid colonial state structures, armies and military mechanisms of various sorts. This reinforced and rationalised the inequitable social, economic and political systems of the colonizers, thereby de-legitimising alternative worldviews and social, economic and cultural practices of Caribbean peoples indigenous to the region as well as the predominantly African and Asian forced labour migrants.

Colonial processes and discourse therefore served to construct ‘race’ and ‘racism’ as central organising principles of Caribbean life, traditions and ideology, manifest in the economy, society, culture and social, sexual and gender relations. Thus constructs of race and colour became the bases of social and economic disparities, as well as of cultural diversity and creativity. So entrenched were these racialised structures of inequality in the region, first between Europeans and indigenous people and later Europeans and Africans, that they were able to incorporate new groups as they entered Caribbean societies. As such, all new groups found themselves located somewhere on the ranking order of status and acceptability and moved up or down it depending on their colour, appearance, changing financial status and the circumstances of their entrance. It is not accidental or surprising then that ideas of race and colour eventually came to be solidified within class structures and status systems which have, over time, reproduced themselves in varying permutations throughout the region.

It must be noted however, that although issues of ‘race’ and colour have been central to Caribbean history and social and economic stratification, these issues have not emerged in the same way in all places and at all times across the region. Differences in regimes of race and colour emerged based on the racial ideologies and practices of the main coloniser, e.g. Britain, Spain, France, the United States or The Netherlands, the patterns of economic production, the extent of importation of other migrant labouring populations and other patterns of migration. Common to all of these racialized systems, however, was the privileged position of ‘whiteness’ and the negative racialization of dark skin colours and, thus, persons of African descent.

Feminist scholars have contributed significantly towards deconstructing the categories of ‘race’,

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Long’s three volume *History of Jamaica 1774* is often taken as one of the early treatises of modern racism.

ethnicity’ and ‘nation’ and exposing their gendered character. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) note that:

The boundary of the ethnic is often dependent on gender and there is a reliance on gender attributes for specifying ethnic identity; much of ethnic culture is organized around rules relating to sexuality, marriage and the family, and a true member will perform these roles properly. Communal boundaries often use differences in the way women are socially constructed as markers (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992:113).

In the Caribbean, a scholarship on the gendered nature of ‘race’ and ethnic difference emerged in the 1990s (see Mohammed 1994, Tang Nain 1991, Baksh-Soodeen 1998, Reddock 2001).<sup>4</sup> By then, the primacy of class in social analysis had been increasingly undermined by the defeat of Marxism, the decline of the radical trade union movement and the emergence of social and economic neo-liberalism. The language of class struggle was replaced by one of poverty alleviation in development thinking, a process to be accomplished by projects, programmes and micro-enterprise development, no longer through collective struggle and political action.

The increased visibility of ethnically based collectivities in the region, in particular the emergence of Indo-Caribbean and indigenous identity movements, and the personal and political experiences of women scholars and activists, may also have contributed to the feminist discourses on ‘race/ethnicity’ and gender which emerged at this time. These have contributed, in a largely uncoordinated way, to what I have called an emerging discourse on Difference and Feminism relevant to this sub-region (Reddock 2001a).

In conceptualizing difference in the Caribbean, it is important to note that in colonial contexts ethnic collectivities were historically defined in opposition to each other. First the indigenous peoples were defined as subordinate to persons of European descent. Later, persons of African descent were defined in opposition to persons of European descent. In the Southern Caribbean countries of Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago, this was also increasingly the case with the majority Indian and African descended populations being defined in opposition to each other. Tejaswini Naranjana observes:

It may be worth emphasizing that the maintenance of distinctions between the “Christianized African Creole” and the “Asiatic coolie” was a matter of some concern for the colonial authorities as well. After the establishment of the Republic of Haiti in 1803, the specter of successful non-white revolt haunted every European in the Caribbean. Any stint of solidarity between laborers, especially of different races, was speedily crushed. As the planters faced the prospect of the end of indenture, and the imminent formation of a purely domestic labor force, images of the shiftless, lazy African and the industrious coolie circulated with increasing frequency. The colonial constructions of “Indian” and “African” continues to inform the contemporary formations of the two groups’ identities (Naranjana, 1999:235-236).

In particular, women have been ‘othered’ in relation to each other and stereotypical distinctions have become markers of group difference. Afro-Caribbean women, for example were constructed as

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<sup>4</sup> By then, the primacy of class in social analysis had been increasingly undermined by the defeat of Marxism, the decline of the radical trade union movement and the emergence of social and economic neo-liberalism.

loose, immoral, loud, independent and sexually available; In contrast Indo-Caribbean women were constructed as chaste, pure, controlled and sexually unavailable (Reddock, 2001). This is so although historical records seriously challenge these stereotypes (Reddock 1994). In this regard, Naranjana argues that “The East Indian woman in post slavery society, then, brought in to compensate colonial planters for the loss of captive labor, had to be imaged as completely different from the African, woman (Naranjana,1999:236).”

Afro-Indo conflict has in recent years become paramount in the parts of the region with a significant Indo-Caribbean population, superseding the earlier and more dominant white/black dichotomy. Feminist scholarship on race and ethnicity internationally on the other hand, has been dominated by the rhetoric of the white/black binary. This has been so because of the hegemony of Euro-American cultural and economic influences worldwide, but also because of the weight given to scholarship from the North where the white/black binary has been the dominant construct of ethnic discourse. Although as noted by Susan Freidman, even in the United States:

...the dualistic “black and white checkerboard” of race that has long dominated the American consciousness of racism has been reconfigured in multiracial, multicultural terms ... These narratives of multiethnic, multiracial and multicultural conflict do not of course, render irrelevant the systematic forms of white racism against people of color in the United States (Friedman,1995:2).

Not surprisingly therefore, in the face of Euro-American (White) cultural and ‘racial’ hegemony and political and economic dominance, there has been little space for the analysis of relationships among subordinate groups of women (and men) in the United States. So while the white/black binary continues to be an important backdrop and context for relations among ethnic collectivities in virtually all contexts (Reddock, 2001a) other relationships structured by class, colonialism, racism, colourism religion and other structural markers create inequality, mutual mistrust, fear and inter-ethnic conflict and violence in various parts of the world. As a inter-ethnic conflict has been the basis for a majority of military conflicts and civil war in the world over the last two decades (See Freidman, 2001:23-25). It is precisely for this reason that feminist activists and scholars of the Caribbean need to address these issues. Race and other forms of identity politics have the potential to fragment and neutralise social movements at a time when a rapidly globalising Euro-American capitalism is negatively affecting the social and economic welfare of millions in the Economic North and South. Attention to difference is one way of confronting this issue and its divisive and conflictual potential.

While the focus of this paper is on relationships between women of subordinate racial or ethnic groups, how then should we understand ‘the white other’ in the Caribbean? The focus here is not to suggest that whiteness and white privilege are no longer important in the Caribbean region. White privilege is maintained (although significantly reduced) through the practice of colour privilege and the continued presence of Euro-American national, regional and transnational corporate interests and global communications. White privilege acts as a backdrop against which struggles of subordinate groups take place. At the same time the contribution of Euro-Caribbean(White) and other privileged minority women active in the women’s movement throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century must be acknowledged. Women such as May Farquharson, Beatrice Greig, Honor Ford-Smith and others

have contributed to the discourses on ‘race’ and ‘class’ which emerged over that period.<sup>5</sup>

In reflecting on Andaiye’s statement, this article examines the ways in which ‘class’ and ‘race’ have emerged in the consciousness and actions of women’s movement activists and feminists in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>6</sup> This has been different at different points in history; and shaped by the existing context, the political orientation of the activists and the changing dynamics of racialization and ethnicization.

We need however to examine the efficacy of these approaches, the extent to which they were successful and the lessons to be learnt for the future. We need to analyse the mechanisms through which the women’s movement and women’s organisations – feminist and otherwise – have interacted, negotiated, created alliances, coalitions or sought to challenge hierarchies and divisions in their theory and everyday praxis.<sup>7</sup> To do so, I examine the work of the early feminists of the Anglophone Caribbean: women like Catherine McKenzie, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Amy Bailey and Una Marson of Jamaica, and Audrey Jeffers and Gema Ramkeesoon of Trinidad and Tobago. These were middle class women who were actively conscious of their African/Indian heritage at a time of great European colonial power and control. Their relationship to women of the working classes ranged from solidarity to charity. I also refer to the work of working-class women’s activists such as Christina Lewis in Trinidad and Tobago, whose class activism always reflected her feminist consciousness as well as her consciousness of ‘race’. The paper then explores the later period of the Caribbean Women’s movement in the 1980s which resulted in the formation of a regional feminist organisation, CAFRA - The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action.

### **‘Race’ and ‘Ethnic’ Consciousness in the Early Anglophone Caribbean Women’s Movement**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, less than one hundred years after the abolition of slavery, Afro- Caribbean women’s identification with feminist politics in the Anglophone Caribbean was integrally combined with concern for their race locally, in Africa and elsewhere. At this time, the European colonial administrative and oligarchic classes were still powerful and oppressive, colonial race and colour structures were still very much in place. Therefore struggles by early middle-class and working class women of this region could not be separated from their overall concern for the social upliftment of their race, sex and, in the case of working women, class. As the term was introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the women activists of this period defined themselves as feminist. When they did not use the term to describe themselves, it was used by their detractors and supporters to identify them. Their lives and work reflected an awareness or consciousness of the subordination of women which they actively sought to change.

The emergence of Pan-Africanist movements in the Caribbean and the Caribbean Diaspora at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century provided one context for such women to be involved in social and political organisation. One of the earliest public feminists identified in the region is Catherine McKenzie,

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<sup>5</sup> See Honor Ford Smith and SISTREN – *Lionheart Gal*, Women’s Press, Toronto. 1986, republished The UWI Press, Kingston 2005; Reddock, 1994 and Miss Amy and Miss May, Video by Sistren Women’s Theatre Collective.

<sup>6</sup> A similar paper could also be done on how these movements tried to address ‘class’ issues in their work.

<sup>7</sup> There has been more discussion of women’s actions in high-profile conflict situations such as in Palestine and Israel.

secretary of the Kingston Branch of the Pan African Association(PAA) of Jamaica.<sup>8</sup> McKenzie, a member of the People's Convention, founded by Dr. Robert Love, which later incorporated the Jamaica PAA, was clearly concerned about her race but she also expressed strong concerns about her sex. In numerous speeches and presentations, she made her demands for women's equality and human rights, as shown in the excerpt below:

Everywhere in the world, and all along the course of the world's history, a state of things has existed in which the rights accorded to women have left much to be desired. Just why woman has been denied all the rights which are accorded to man is one of the unexplained relations of life, except it be that it is man alone who has made the laws denying her such rights... (The Advocate, 10.8.1901 cited in Vassell, 1993:17).

Unfortunately, Catherine McKenzie had a short life, dying in a fire in 1903. She was but one of a group of Afro-Caribbean women who during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century championed the rights of women within and through of Pan Africanism. Another example is Amy Ashwood Garvey, the first wife of Marcus Garvey, who worked with him to establish the early United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica.<sup>9</sup> She was its first secretary and member of the Board of Management and was responsible for starting the Ladies Division which later developed into the Black Cross Nurses Arm<sup>10</sup> of the organisation. Much of the later activism of Amy Ashwood outside of the UNIA took place in England, where she was heavily involved in Pan-Africanist and feminist activities as through her friendship with Sylvia Pankhurst, the Ethiopianist and feminist.

Joan French and Honor Ford-Smith credit Garveyism as being a major influence on the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century women's movement in Jamaica. They note that:

...The UNIA was the training ground for almost all the women active in on feminist issues in the 1930s. From its ranks came both the feminist liberals and the women of the working classes who were active in the 1938 period. It offered a chance for both to organise in women's arms and to be in the leadership of the organisation internationally and locally. It did not however challenge the image of woman as essentially a housewife and social worker. For this reason it did not offer a completely clear path of resistance to the colonial definition of woman (French and Ford-Smith, 1985:226).

At the same time they recognised that women in this movement did not simply follow Garvey but created their own image of themselves.<sup>11</sup> In a later work Ford-Smith suggests that it was the contradiction between the stress on Black masculinity at the formal level of the movement and the dependence on women's work to build the organisation that may have contributed to the emergence of Black feminist activism in Jamaica in the 1930s (Ford-Smith, 2004:30).

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<sup>8</sup> The Association had as its aim to: 'secure [for] Africans and their descendants throughout the world their civil and political rights; ameliorate the condition of our oppressed brethren in the continents of Africa, America and other parts of the world by promoting efforts to secure effective legislation; encourage our people in education, industrial and commercial enterprise; foster friendly relations between Caucasian and African races;' ... (Lewis, 1977:63)

<sup>9</sup> Also known as the Garvey Movement, with branches all over the Caribbean including Cuba.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the example of the Red Cross

<sup>11</sup> Honor Ford-Smith, "Women and the Garvey Movement in Jamaica", Rupert Lewis and Patrick Bryan (eds) *Garvey: His Work and Impact*, ISER-Mona, and UWI Extra Mural Studies Department, Kingston, 1988, p. 77).

Garvey's deportation from the United States to Jamaica in 1927 occurred at a pivotal time in the development of the early movement there. According to Ford-Smith, his ideas influenced the anti-racist, feminist practice of working and middle-class women activists such as Adina Spencer, Aggie Bernard, Madame de Mena, Una Marson and Amy Bailey of the Jamaica Women's Liberal Club (Ford-Smith, 2004: 30).<sup>12</sup> For instance, Amy Bailey in an interview with Ford-Smith acknowledged Garvey's influence in the inclusion of the study of Negro history in the objectives of the Women's Liberal Club, and in her focus on Black women as a group (Ford-Smith, 2004:30).

Henrice Altink identifies "colour discrimination" as one of the issues addressed by Jamaica's "black feminists" in the inter-war period, especially in the writings of Una Marson and Amy Bailey (Altink, 2006: 7-9). She notes that many of these women had experienced the limitations of their own life prospects due to their dark skin colour. But colour discrimination was not only an issue in relation to Black and White women or Black and White men, but also among women of various 'shades'. Colour and shade distinctions may have had a similar impact on feminist solidarity then as 'race' and ethnic differences may be having today. At the same time therefore as these feminists sought the

Valorisation of their colour and 'race' they collaborated with. "White" feminists such as May Farquharson in Jamaica and Beatrice Greig and Gema Ramkeesoon in Trinidad and Tobago, and worked to combat shadism and colour prejudice among African-descended women within their societies (SISTREN Research and Wilmot, 1990; Reddock 1994, Altink, 2006).<sup>13</sup>

In her writing in Jamaican periodicals and newspapers, Amy Bailey drew attention to discrimination against black women in urban employment for example in the case cited by French and Ford-Smith below:

"The case is mentioned of an extract from one of Amy Bailey's articles in The Newspaper entitled "Not Wanted" where she confronted employers about not hiring black women:

At one place, TIMES STORE, the owner told me 'we have them, Miss Bailey, but they are upstairs.' 'Well put them downstairs, Mr, Durie, we want to see them.' (Cited in French and Ford-Smith, 1985:249)

This issue also was raised by Trinidadian, Audrey Jeffers, in different contexts including her address to the First Conference of British West Indies and British Guianese Women Social Workers in Port of Spain in 1936 (Reddock, 1994:173) - the failure to employ women of dark skin colour or to relegate them to the back of commercial establishments (Reddock, 1994:172).

This combination of feminist action with race and class consciousness reflects how difficult it was for Afro-Caribbean women to separate these three aspects of their experience. Race, class and

<sup>12</sup> Henrice Altink identifies in addition women like – Eulalie Domingo, Mary Morris-Knibb and Aimee Webster among this group of what she terms 'black feminists.' Henrice Altink, "The Misfortune of being black and female": Black Feminist Thought in Interwar Jamaica", *Thirdspace*, Volume 5, Issue 2, January 2006, p. 1

<sup>13</sup> This may still be relevant in parts of the region today.

gender all intersected to influence their lives, having what King (1988) calls a ‘multiplicative effect (King,1988).’ For example, Henrice Altink refers to Bailey and others’ writings on gender discrimination in the workplace, which was sometimes addressed on its own but often conflated with colour discrimination.

Another example of an early Caribbean feminist who addressed issues of race was Una Marson, a playwright, poet and journalist who in 1929, edited Jamaica’s first women’s publication, *The Cosmopolitan*, the official organ of the Jamaica Stenographers Association. Living in London between 1932 and 1935, she acted as secretary of the League of Coloured Peoples, which provided her with opportunities for involvement in Pan-Africanist activities and to meet West Indian and African students and activists. Along with her increased exposure to Pan-Africanist organisations and ideas, Marson was also in touch with women’s organisations such as the Women’s Freedom League, the Women’s Peace Crusade, the British Commonwealth League and the Women’s International Alliance.

In 1936, Marson returned to Jamaica where, with Amy Bailey and others, she contributed to the burgeoning feminist and black consciousness among sections of the middle classes: she was one of a number of Afro-Jamaican feminists, including Eulalie Domingo, Adina Spencer and Mary Morris-Knibb, whose writings in *The Daily Gleaner*, *Public Opinion* and other periodicals raised a range of issues related to colour, gender and class discrimination in 1930s Jamaica. For instance her play, *Pocomania*, written in 1937, was seen as a breakthrough at the time because of its use of Jamaican language and its focus on Afro-Christian popular religion. As Ford-Smith notes:

Angry, unladylike middle-class black women searching out the secret knowledges of Afro-Christian religions were officially denigrated in the 1930s, seen as slightly ridiculous or out of control. Black female anger and cross-class solidarity were as taboo in women’s organisations as they were in the wider world (Ford-Smith, 2004:31).

Marson’s early poem, *Kinky Hair Blues*, addressed a continuing theme in the lives and identities of African-descended women, namely the politics of hair. In the poem she took a then unpopular stance against “ironed” or straightened Afro-hair consistent with her stance in her political and creative work, to make political points about African culture and peoples. As noted by her biographer, Delia Jarrett-Macauley:

In *Songs of Africa* (1930) she applauds the music of Afro-Creole people of the Americas that fosters race pride and the determination to be free. Fragments of colour, people, places and warmth form an intricate pattern. Again, in *There will come a time* (1931) she cries out for racial equality as the foundation of her dream of the oneness of the world’s diverse peoples. Her poem *To Mothers* (1931) is a praise-song to women of all races seeking to build a world of equality. Years later, this theme is celebrated in *The Moth and the Star* (1937), her third collection of poems. Her use of local tones and voices never really satisfied Black bourgeois tastes and attitudes. Liberal whites were uncomfortable with her affirmation that black is beautiful. You are struck by the writer’s searingly courageous stance. The mass of Marson’s literary output shows that her political views were no sudden eruption. They were always at hand strengthening her Black poetics. (Jarret-Macauley, 22.11.03).

Audrey Jeffers of Trinidad and Tobago is another example of these early Pan-Africanist feminists,

who combined efforts for her race with those for her sex. Jeffers, a member of Trinidad's then small Black land-owning class, was an early member of the Society of Peoples of African Origin, formed by fellow Trinidadian F.E.M. Hercules, and was later founder of the Coterie of Social Workers, the leading organisation of 'black and coloured' middle-class women of the 1920s-1940s.

The Coterie campaigned for women's right to secondary education, for the introduction of women police and for the Divorce Act. They also established social work programmes focussed on women and children. Like its Jamaican counterpart, The Women's Liberal Club, the Coterie raised issues of racial discrimination, for instance calling for increased employment of black women in white collar occupations. Jeffers was the honoured guest at the Negro Progress Congress in British Guiana to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of freedom from slavery, and chose then to address the women's session of the convention on the topic, 'Women and their Responsibility to the Race' (Comma-Maynard, 1971:93). Referring to Jane, mother of Booker T. Washington, Jeffers called on women to take a serious view of life and come forward to "help in the new epoch of the reconstruction of the race (Comma-Maynard, 1971:92-93)."

In May 1936, the Coterie and Audrey Jeffers hosted the First Conference of British West Indian and British Guianese Women Social Workers in Port of Spain.<sup>14</sup> In her presentation, "The Urgent Needs of Women in Trinidad and Tobago," Jeffers, like Amy Bailey in Jamaica, highlighted employment discrimination against educated black women, referring, to her own private census which had found that there were only three such women in the government service, six to eight on the whole of Frederick Street,<sup>15</sup> none in the groceries and only two in the leading business firms. For the majority of these women, the only alternatives were teaching and nursing, and women in small stores worked 13-14 hours daily and earned only \$1.50 per week (Trinidad Guardian, 20, May, 1936: 8).

One of the few Indo-Trinidadian women to be associated with the Coterie and the Caribbean women's movement at this time was Gema Ramkeesoon. Ramkeesoon had been influenced by Beatrice Greig, a white feminist labour and literary activist whose wide-ranging interests included the people and literature of India. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Greig, in the absence of visible activists for Indo-Trinidadian women, became a voice on their behalf. As a regular contributor to *The East Indian Weekly*, she consistently raised issues related to Indian women such as girls' education, child marriage and others which were at the time difficult for Indian women to raise themselves (Reddock, 1995:105-106). Suggesting that for Indo-Caribbean women as well the link between race and gender was also important, Ramkeesoon together with Patrick Solomon in 1949 established the short-lived Indo-Caribbean Cultural Council to work towards improving relations among the two major ethnic groups in Trinidad and Tobago. Ramkeesoon was also a member of the Welcoming Committee established for the visit of Amy Ashwood Garvey in 1953 and had been present during her visit to Barbados just prior to this. At the launch of the Barbados Women's Alliance, which she chaired, Gema Ramkeesoon paid tribute to Marcus Garvey and spoke of the future advancement Africans and Indians could achieve by marching side by side (Reddock, 1994:248).

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<sup>14</sup> Representatives from British Guiana, Barbados, St. Lucia and Grenada attended.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Street is the main shopping street in the capital, Port of Spain.

What is clear from the above is that issues of gender and race were central to the work and consciousness of the early feminists of the Anglophone Caribbean, but in a very different way from that which was to develop later in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Their work was directed primarily at the hegemonic white plantocratic and colonial elite, and opposed to the hierarchical system based on race, colour and class which supported it. Little attention was paid to relations between the majority African-descended population and other ethnic groups such as the Indian populations in Guyana and Trinidad or other minority populations. Although small numbers of women of these minority groups were involved in the women's movement, albeit in very limited ways.

This was possibly because the race and colour discrimination which Afro-Caribbean women faced overshadowed their relations with women of other ethnic groups which were not considered problematic at that time. Additionally the Indigenous and Indo-Caribbean populations at this time were primarily rural. But in Guyana, already by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, Indo-Guyanese women were beginning to become more visible although still to a limited degree in Women's Political and Economic Organization (WPEO) formed by Winifred Gaskin and Janet Jagan (Peake, 1993:115). The alignment of the successor organisation the Women's Progressive Organisation (WPO) with the socialist Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) meant that with the eventual 'racial split' in that party the middle-class women's movement was divided along 'racial' lines (Peake, 1993:115-116)

Unfortunately, in terms of class relations, some of the middle-class feminists saw their relationship to working-class women more as one of charity than solidarity, although issues related to the working conditions of working-class women were raised. They saw this relationship as an important means to improve the standing of their 'race' and, accordingly, many of their social work programmes sought to 'uplift 'poor' women' to where they felt they should be. In Jamaica for example, as early as 1929, calls were made by Una Marson for unemployment bureaus and private and public work schemes to increase work opportunities for working-class women (Altink, 2006:3). Similarly, in her articles, "Sweated Labour," Bailey drew attention to the working conditions of female factory workers, and even called on better off women to support the establishment of a minimum wage and improved working conditions (Altink, 2006:3-4). Their actions in this regard, however aimed more at maintaining the status quo than transforming it (Altink, 2006:13). Theirs could be described as a kind of liberal feminism which sought integration of black women (and men) into the established system rather than a more radical politics. It is therefore not surprising that while advocating the right for enfranchised Black women such as themselves to be elected to public office, they did not advocate universal adult suffrage, promoted by Bahamian/Jamaican Pan-Africanist, Robert Love, as early as 1901 (See Reddock, 2001). Instead, in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1940s, Jeffers and Marceline Archibald, as members of the Franchise Committee, voted against immediate Universal Adult Suffrage, using Jeffers now famous phrase: "we must hasten slowly." This was denounced by working-class feminist activist Christina Lewis in these words:

As a woman and West Indian I feel happy at times to see two members of my sex on our local Legislatures, but I often feel ashamed when the vote is taken to find them voting against the elected representatives of the people. Given the opportunity I will return poor and hardworking persons who know the pains of labour into the Legislature... most of the Intellectuals we voted to represent our

views have joined hands against the interest of the working-class. (*The People* 26.3.49).

Lewis, working-class feminist activist was a member of the Butler Movement<sup>16</sup>; had attempted to form a Domestic Servants Union and had established the Caribbean Women's National Assembly in the 1950s. This organisation introduced the celebration of March 8, International Women's Day in the 1950s and campaigned for paid maternity leave as well as the banning of imported comic strips – Mandrake and Phantom which they considered racist in their depiction of people of African descent. Lewis, was also associated with the socialist West Indian Independence Party(WIIP) and was investigated for seditious activities in the 1950s. Her activism and foresight, is an example of working-class feminism which also characterised the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and whose influence should also be acknowledged.

### **Race, Ethnicity and the 2nd Wave**

Issues of race and ethnicity were also in clear focus at the period when Caribbean feminism re-emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. This was a period when the call for Black Power and black consciousness rippled through the region. It was also a time of social upheaval on other fronts including the Marxist, socialist and New Left movements; national liberation struggles in Africa, and other social movements in Asia and Latin America. Not surprisingly, as with the Anti-Slavery movements in Britain and the USA at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, many of the women who would emerge as leaders of the new women's movement would come out of the socialist-oriented and left movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

### **The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA)**

After the renewed Black consciousness movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a discernible shift in emphasis in political discourse from 'race' to 'class' by the late 1970s and 1980s. This period was one of the high points of socialist and anti-imperialist organising among the young and not so young in the region. Even governments took pro-socialist and anti-imperialist positions, as did revolutionary Cuba, democratic socialist Jamaica and socialist Grenada. Much of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave activism was carried out by women in organisations associated with left organisations. These included: the Committee of Women for Progress (CWP) in Jamaica; The Committee for the Development of Women in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (CDW), Concerned Women for Progress (CWP) and The Democratic Women's Association in Trinidad and Tobago; and later Red Thread in Guyana.

Yet with time those links between women activists and the Left would be broken as the former sought more autonomous spaces for organising and for challenging male hegemony in personal and political life. The conflict between the primacy of 'class' or 'sex' was one of the main factors which led to the formation of The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA). Many of its founding members came to feel great discomfort with their experiences in leftist

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<sup>16</sup> Working-class movement led by Grenada born Tubal Uriah Buzz Butler in Trinidad in the 1930s and 1940s.

political parties and organisations. While there was official acceptance of women's equality in these organisations, they were in actuality patriarchal structures, with strict hierarchies and few women in leadership positions. Feminist-oriented ideas in these spaces were dismissed as 'bourgeois,' 'foreign' and, as a result, 'irrelevant' and potentially divisive; consider, for instance, that one of the original group of women who discussed forming the organisation which eventually became CAFRA,<sup>17</sup> was uncomfortable with the implications of using the word 'feminist' in the Caribbean and failed to join at its inception.

Activists genuinely concerned with women's issues and gender relations found it difficult, to continue working in the existing leftist organisations. This experience was reflected in the third of CAFRA's original objectives: "to bring a feminist perspective to bear on the work of existing progressive organisations and shatter the myth that feminism divides the struggle." Thus the original aims and objectives of CAFRA in 1985 reflect the founders' concerns at that time. Looking back now, these objectives sound quaint and strange but they did reflect the issues which were motivating us at that time. The General aims were:

- (i) To develop an approach to women's problems from the perspective of race, class and sex, specifically to show how the exploitative relationship between men and women, facilitates the continuation, maintenance and reproduction of exploitative capitalist relations, and how the capitalist system benefits from this approach:
- (ii) To develop an approach to the analysis of relations between men and women in non-capitalist and socialist societies;
- (iii) To develop the feminist movement in the entire Caribbean region; and
- (iv) To promote the inter-relationship between research and action.

In choosing, despite opposition, to use the term 'feminist' in its title, the early CAFRA membership sought to create its own definition of Caribbean feminism which was inclusive in relation to class, race or ethnicity and colour. It also sought to be pan-Caribbean in its outlook and composition. It must be asked, however, to what extent was CAFRA able to accomplish its mission, and the reasons why it failed to live up to its original ideals. Rawwida Baksh, first coordinator of CAFRA, suggests that one reason may have been the organisation's failure to articulate its analysis of the situation of all race/ethnic/class/other groups of women in the Caribbean, drawing on our multiplicity of research/activist experience. Perhaps, this was the first piece of research/action she reflects, that should have been undertaken collectively. Based on this analysis an outreach to the wider collectivities of women in our societies and region could have been developed.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Others were Sonia Cuales, Honor Ford-Smith and Rhoda Reddock.

<sup>18</sup> Correspondence on reading an earlier draft of this paper, June 2006.

Yet even at this stage, theoretical discussions were already taking place on class, which was, in the 1970s and 1980s, a much-debated concept. These often took place within a wider debate on whether Marxism and Marxist-derived concepts were relevant to Caribbean society. In the mainstream left, the critique against Marxism as a white ideology in the context of the Black Power movement and nationalist sentiments reflected a continuing tension which was mirrored in the efforts of feminists to mobilize and collaborate with women of different classes and ethnicities - the perennial problem of feminist movements. In many ways this is a problem which has not yet been solved. In Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, by the late 1980s, there was also a shift in the discourse on race and ethnicity. There was a move away from efforts to valorise 'Blackness' in the face of white cultural and economic hegemony. Instead there was an increasing assertion of Indo-Caribbean rights of citizenship, cultural representation and inclusion and Afro-Caribbean responses to this.

Diana Wells suggests that in Trinidad and Tobago, the shift to autonomous feminist politics from the more Marxist-oriented approaches resulted in a reduction of ethnic and class diversity among the membership of the new women's organisations (Wells, 2000). Though in its early days CAFRA did have a significant representation of Indo-Caribbean and women of other minorities<sup>19</sup> — for instance, the first Co-ordinator, Rawwida Baksh (Soodeen) was an Indo-Trinidadian of Muslim background — it ultimately failed in its outreach to the wider population of women of the region. Rawwida herself observes in 1998:

Further, feminist organizing has also been largely viewed as the domain of African women, rather than as a space in which women of different racial/cultural identities and experiences interact. Women who have been 'left out' in this process include the remaining indigenous inhabitants, Indian, Chinese, and other groups such as the Indonesians. The experience of the white woman has also been left out, deliberately I think, because the discourse has emerged from the standpoint of people who have been brutally enslaved by Europeans. The white woman is hence perceived as belonging to the oppressor race, class, and culture, despite the fact that a few white women have also been part of the feminist movement in Caribbean (Baksh-Soodeen, 1998:72).

CAFRA was criticised for not adequately representing Indo-Caribbean women, for instance. In 1993, Roseanne Kanhai, an Indo-Trinidadian member, wrote a letter to CAFRA NEWS after attending the Third General Meeting in Guyana, in which she faulted the organisation for "not responding to the issues of Indian women" and not attracting them to its membership. She noted that there was a marginal presence of Indo-Caribbean women at the meeting ... and no expressions of Indian culture at the Cultural evening (Mehta, 2004:96). She did however acknowledge the potential difficulties in attracting Indian women, as they were uncomfortable with certain kinds of activism and shied away from confrontation especially when they constituted a minority (Wells: 2000:158).

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<sup>19</sup> These included Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen, coordinator for many years, Ramabai Espinet, Patricia Mohammed, Gaietry Pargass, Indra Chanderpal first national representative for Guyana and more recently Sharda Ganga of Suriname and Gabrielle Hosein of Trinidad and Tobago. Euro-Caribbean women included - Honor Ford-Smith, founding member, Nan Peacocke and Tina Johnson.

Diane Wells, based on her study of cross-ethnic women's networks in Trinidad in the late 1990s, suggests that there may have been other reasons for such difficulties. She argued that many of the groups and organisations claiming to be feminist in the 1970s and 1980s comprised predominantly Afro-Trinidadian women, many of whom were educated abroad or at the University of the West Indies. These Afro-Caribbean women activists came from a tradition of public social action by women, which included the formation of and participation in women's organisations. Feminism in this context was therefore seen as part of an Afro-Trinidadian version of womanhood which some Indian women were not willing to adopt (Wells, 2000:187). This argument resonates with the antipathy held by many African-American women to the idea of feminism in the USA, where it was constructed as a primarily white concern, hence resistance to the label by many African-American women activists<sup>20</sup> and the emergence of the term, 'womanism.'

Using a culturalist argument, Wells suggests that the family structures and social control exercised over Indo-Trinidadian women's lives at that time also worked against their involvement in activist organisations. According to her:

Meetings frequently required travelling to Port of Spain or the East West Corridor where few Indo-Trinidadians lived...Another source of conflict was that these hours were important times for Indian women to be with their families, whether or not they had their own careers. One Indian woman who was specially invited to an organisation's annual retreat ...responded to the invitation in the following way: "No Indian woman who is married and has children can spend an overnight away from her family" She did, however attend the day sessions and drove two hours in each direction to fulfil her obligations. "Feminists, the perception goes, do not have families" (Wells, 2000:188).<sup>21</sup>

The reality is however those feminists do have families but that family structures are differently organised. While it is true that marriage is the norm for most Indo-Trinidadian women it was less so for their Afro-Trinidadian counterparts. Even for women in a marriage or other unions, there was greater freedom of movement and family support for child care and so on for the latter group. Indo Trinidadian women by that time had already begun to challenge many of these stereotypical norms, increasing numbers were gaining employment outside of the home and were physically mobile with their own networks e.g. attending the transgressive 'chutney' events in large numbers.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the Afro-Trinidadian women in the activist groups at the time, however, were not married although many did have children and, similarly, "many of the Indo-Trinidadian women who have been attracted to the more active organisations, which correspondingly involve time commitment, have generally been women who have rejected the traditional Indian family life – or were in the process of constructing new kinds of family and kinship systems (Wells:2000:189). She concluded:

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<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this see R. Reddock, "Conceptualising Difference in Caribbean Creole Societies" in Brian Meeks and Folke Lindhal(eds.) *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader*, The UWI Press, Kingston, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Actually this invitation was to a training programme for women's organisation organised by Workingwomen and carried out by the Women and Development Unit, UWI Barbados. The training programme was organised over four weekends at the then Farrell House Hotel in Point a Pierre.

<sup>22</sup> I thank Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen for this insight.

In sum, the differently positioned ethnic groups have distinct relationships in the criticism they are subjected to in connection with European and American ideas of womanhood. The stakes for Indo-Trinidadian women involved in the women's movement are different from those of Afro-Trinidadian women. For the Indo-Trinidadian women, claiming the feminist identity is seen as rejecting an Indo-Trinidadian identity because a key aspect of that identity includes a gender hierarchy implicit within the family structure (Wells, 2000:190).<sup>23</sup>

According to Wells therefore, feminism became constructed as part of an oppositional 'modern' Creole identity. Participation in this identity differs for men and women because of the complex interplay of patriarchy, ethnicity and nationhood. While Indo-Trinidadian men are free to compete with Afro-Trinidadian men in the Creole public space, Indo-Trinidadian women are held as symbolic markers of their culture, family and tradition, and therefore have a greater responsibility to maintain ethnic and cultural purity. Gabrielle Hosein identifies what she has called "differential creolisation" among young women and men in Trinidad and Tobago. Based on research among high school students in north-east Trinidad, she argues that Indo-Trinidadian young men find it easier to participate in the 'modern creole' mainstream than young women, for whom identifications with the creole had negative connotations. She found that:

Whereas males gain masculine status by becoming creolised, females lose 'Indianness', femininity and 'difference' – markers of Indo-Trinidadian female honour. Therefore, for Indo-Trinidadian (adolescent) females, the counterpart to honour is shame – associated with loss of 'community' values, disobedience to patriarchal and elder control and a move to identification with creolised masculinity (Hosein, 2001:7-8).

It is also possible that structural economic reasons may have contributed to the relatively lower participation of Indo-Trinidadian women in the feminist movement. Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana are distinct in the Anglophone Caribbean for their lower if increasing proportions of women in the labour force. Afro-Trinidadian women have a longer history of economic independence and labour force participation, albeit often at the lower economic levels, than Indo-Trinidadian women, many of whom were withdrawn from paid work after indentureship<sup>24</sup>. This may be a contributing factor for their higher levels of participation, physical mobility and familiarity with the public space relative to the latter. The correlation between class and extent of participation is also supported by the fact that the majority of Indo and Afro-Trinidadian women active in the movement tended to be part of the emerging professional middle-class.

Yet for other analysts, the issue was that much of the feminist activism was located in urban areas, whereas the Indo-Caribbean population tended to be more rural based. Some organisations recognised this and focused specifically on rural and agriculturally based women. The Democratic Women's Association, a group linked to the socialist-oriented Communist Party of Trinidad and Tobago and which had Indo-Trinidadian women leaders, for example, worked primarily in rural and

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<sup>23</sup> I would disagree with Wells there though that what was at stake were European and American ideas of womanhood. There was a serious attempt of develop Caribbean Feminist understandings.

<sup>24</sup> It is true that many Indo-Caribbean continued work on the plantations but in decreasing numbers. Many in rural areas became responsible for market gardening but were not perceived of as the main producers or farmers and were not paid an income (Reddock, 1994).

inner city communities, a strategy which allowed greater access to ‘grassroots’ Indo and Afro-Trinidadian women. In similar vein, Indrani Rampersad,<sup>25</sup> a founding member of the Hindu Women’s Association of Trinidad and Tobago would later criticise its middle-class membership and attempt to form a Rural Women’s Association in Central Trinidad in the 1990s (Wells, 2000).

In concluding, it must be stressed that all populations of women are heterogeneous with internal differences of class, age, and geographic location. The participation of middle-class educated Indo-Trinidadian women may be a reflection of their greater economic autonomy, social and spatial mobility and familiarity with the public space. Yet the focus on Indo-Trinidadian women’s absence from the regional women’s movement runs the risk of dismissing the important contributions which they have and continue to make to this movement in its activist, academic and other manifestations. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Indo-Trinidadian women’s visibility in the women’s movement has increased significantly although the movement is today facing many serious challenges.

### **Workingwomen and its Anti-Racism Campaign.<sup>26</sup>**

One community-based women’s organisation in Tunapuna, Trinidad and Tobago, Women Working for Social Progress<sup>27</sup> (Workingwomen), formed in 1985, embarked on an active but uneven programme of anti-racism work in 1996. With a predominantly Afro-Trinidadian membership, Workingwomen always had a minority of Indo-Trinidadian members and sought to reach out to this population through collaboration with other organisations, even as it sought unsuccessfully to significantly diversify its own membership.

In 1995, the first initiative taken was to issue a public statement criticising Afro-Creole Trinidadian calypsonians for racist lyrics. That year was a significant one for Trinidad and Tobago. It was the year when the first Indian-dominated government came to power and it also marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Indians in the Caribbean. This emergence of Indo-Trinidadian political leadership, in a ‘racially charged’ atmosphere was very traumatic for some members of the African-descended population and this was reflected in the stark lyrics of calypsonians that year. The statement by Workingwomen was followed by its decision to institute an anti-racism Campaign; the first major activity being a workshop for members to address their own internalised racism and prejudices. Women of the predominantly Indo-Trinidadian Presbyterian organisation, Church Women United, were invited to participate in these workshops, held on two Saturdays in San Fernando. One of the workshop’s aims was to train participants to do anti-racism work as well as:

To help participants understand the way racism has impacted on our lives and to begin healing from

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<sup>25</sup> Later Pandita Indrani Rampersad

<sup>26</sup> Although the author was present at these events, this section draws heavily on the ethnographic work carried out by US researcher Diana Wells and published in her 2000 doctoral dissertation – *Between the Difference: Trinidadian women’s Collective Action*. The author was also a participant in these workshops and then a member of Workingwomen.

<sup>27</sup> The founding members of this group were Jacqueline Burgess, Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen and Merle Hodge,. Baksh-Soodeen however did not continue to be an active member after the first few years.

those hurts; to begin recovering from the isolation and separation that racism has forced upon us by learning to support each other and to be supported by our own groups (Wells 2000).

Based on her observation of these two workshops, Wells had this to say in relation to a request by the facilitators for participants to acknowledge their heritage:

The individuals present described their heritage in terms that included: Indian, East Indian, Carib, Venezuelan, Spanish, French Creole, European and African. Several individuals ended their descriptions with the phrase “as far as I know” underlining that in this setting some heritages are denied. It was notable that the only participants who indicated a single ethnic identity were those of Indian descent, however these individuals further made distinctions of caste or religion, nuancing this identity (Wells: 2000:202).

In other words, while the identity ‘African’ allowed for mixture, the identity ‘Indian’ did not. In relation to the methodology used she found that:

The method used for this workshop - Re-evaluation Counselling(RC) is one which calls for much public personal sharing of innermost thoughts and emotions and often leads to tears, anger and other deep emotional responses.

Although extremely effective in reaching the deep hurts and scars of internalised racism, participants found this method emotionally difficult and draining. In many ways this is because the women’s movement in Trinidad and Tobago, possibly due to its history of public politics, has little experience and indeed, in some instances, a strong mistrust of deep emotional and introspective work. In other words, there is resistance to the “touchy feely stuff.” According to Wells: “Several participants acknowledged that they were resistant to dealing with many of these issues, which had been so deeply buried and did not see the point of remembering them. ...Most found it more difficult than expected ...everyone agreed that they were not equipped to run an anti-racism workshop. The sense of participants was that this was not a function of a failure of the workshop, rather it was a function of the complexity of issues that they had confronted for the first time” (Wells,2000:202-204).

Also in 1995, Workingwomen hosted the month-long visit of Kalpana Kannabiran, an activist from ASMITA Women’s Collective of Hyderabad, India. The visit was organised to strengthen ties among women of different ethnicities in the women’s movement. Kannabiran visited and addressed women’s organisations throughout Trinidad. She was especially welcomed by Indo-Trinidadian organisations of different religious and political persuasions, and spoke forthrightly about the impact of partition and continued Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. At the end of her visit, the Hindu Women’s Organisation (HWO), an organisation founded in May 1997 with the mission to: uphold the traditions of Hinduism; project the image of the Hindu woman and to educate the general population on matters pertaining to the Hindu woman hosted a tea party in her honour (Wells, 2000:204). The HWO acknowledged the work of Workingwomen and its members in reaching out to women of the Indian community and expressed their appreciation to Dr. Kannabiran for her visit. They also called for more visits by Indian feminists and progressives, as this helped strengthen their

position locally.<sup>28</sup>

The anti-racism campaign continued haphazardly, due partly to difficulties within the organisation. Nevertheless the campaign continued and in 2003, the theme of the 18<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Public Lecture was Challenging Everyday Racism in Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>29</sup> The lecture was introduced as follows:

The anti-racism campaign that we launch today comes 18 years into our organisation's experience. For all the years of our existence, Workingwomen has been concerned with issues of equity. We have 18 years' experience of activist campaigning, the underlying concern of which has been equitable treatment for all groups in the society. Notably we have carried out campaigns of public awareness on issues of IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment, and how its economic policies affect women; the proposed introduction of Export Processing Zones; domestic violence; the use of corporal punishment in schools and the need for alternative, non-violent methods of discipline...We bring to this anti-racism campaign our concern for equity, the strength of these networks, and the diversity of our experiences and friendships" (Hodge and Rampersad, 2003:1).

The presentation included definitions of key terms like 'race' and 'racism,' and analysed the racist language of inclusion and exclusion in everyday use. It was not limited to the two majority ethnic groups in the country but also addressed attitudes towards minorities for example Tobagonians. It also examined the ways in which local language had been racialized, a practice reflected in the use of racist codes and in-group insults by co-ethnics (Hodge and Rampersad, 2003: 6-7). The lecture was carried live on two radio stations, with different ethnic audiences and Chutney/Soca star Rikki Jai spoke of his personal experiences of inter-ethnic relations. The speakers called on women of all races to join with Workingwomen in the campaign against racism. This, however, has not materialised due to the limited reach and inconsistency of the campaign itself.

While the impact of these interventions has been limited, there has been an acknowledgement of their efforts and the limitations which they face. Jacquie Burgess of Workingwomen and a former employee of CAFRA expressed frustration at the burden laid at the feet of these two organisations because of the limited efforts of other groups in the society. HWO leader, Brenda Gopeesingh, acknowledged this, lamenting the difficulties of organising women of her community even for an organisation such as the HWO. As noted by Brinda Mehta:

Burgess' frustration is echoed in the words of Brenda Gopeesingh, the public relations officer of the Hindu Women's Organisation (HWO), who criticises the movement for not growing fast enough despite the great advances made... While Gopeesingh is very critical of the Trinidadian media and its negative coverage of the HWO, she is equally frustrated by the "apathy" demonstrated by some members of her organization. However, she is also quick to recognize the fact that Indian women may not feel comfortable enough to speak out because of their feelings of inferiority and exclusion: "they don't have the gumption to come forward. It's partly cultural. The other groups have been trying to draw us out, but we don't feel comfortable coming out. We want to be part of the national mosaic, but we feel marginalised" (quoted in Sandra Chouti, *Feminism in Need of a Stronger Voice*, Trinidad

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<sup>28</sup> Personal recollections.

<sup>29</sup> Delivered by members Merle Hodge and Sheila Rampersad.

Express, 27, April,2000, cited in Mehta, 2004:202).

### **Red Thread and “race” in Guyana**

Formed in 1986 in Guyana, the Red Thread Women’s organisation with which Andaiye is associated, aims “to initiate dialogue and mutual cooperation between urban Afro-Guyanese and rural Indo-Guyanese women by demonstrating that race is not a barrier to inter-ethnic collaboration”(Andaiye,2000). Using income-generation, in this case embroidery, as their main method of empowerment and mobilization, Red Thread felt that this could serve as a legitimate reason for women’s absence from the home. Embroidery was also used as a mechanism for valorising women’s work (Andaiye, 2000) and as an “instrument of coalition weaving” (Mehta, 2004:103). “Building on the commonality of experience between Indo and Afro-Guyanese women, Red Thread was seriously committed to multiracial organising despite cultural differences” (Mehta, 2004:104). Member Danuta Radzik, recalled that for some Indo-Guyanese women it was the first time they had entered a Black community and they “would have been scared to go were it not for Red Thread (Mehta, 2004:104). Yet, in spite of these conscious efforts to work collectively with Afro and Indo-Guyanese women, they found that:

...African women were still able to take better advantage of whatever opportunities Red Thread provided them because of cultural differences and differences in household organisation. Fewer Indo-Guyanese members were involved in activities such as workshops, which required them to be out for long hours overnight outside their villages. Reasons given were security; the need to supervise their girl children and households; that these activities reduced time for earning; and they felt unable to do workshops because they had less education. (Andaiye, cited in Mehta, 2004:104).

The women did agree however that the opportunities for independent income earning had allowed them to question family restrictions, postpone marriage and children, contest male violence and acquire a new-found sense of self (Mehta,2004:104).

The efforts of women’s organisations in this regard however, receive little public acknowledgement or endorsement. Due to financial and human resource constraints, the anti-racist efforts of women’s organisations do not reach the national populations. Speaking on Women and Ethnic Conflict at a panel discussion in 2002, Andaiye noted that:

On March 8, 2002, 140 women were organized by Red Thread to march in Linden as part of a global strike of women held every year since 2000 in more than 60 countries. Most of the 140 Indo-Guyanese, Afro-Guyanese, Amerindian, and mixed race women in the march were not alive in the early 1960s. But as a new generation they were willing to subscribe to the following words in the handbill we distributed: [Ours] is a struggle of women of all races for women of all races. Because Wismar was a symbol of the terrible racial violence of the 1960s, we, the women, send out this call - Let us make Linden a symbol of how women can cross race divides and fight for a world which values all women's work and all women's lives!. Red Thread informed all the media about our action, but none of them found this attempt at reconciliation important enough to cover (Andaiye, 2004).

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<sup>30</sup> This refers to a period of racial conflict and violence in Guyana in the 1960s. It has been suggested that these were externally agitated due to the socialist orientation of the ruling political party at that time. See Cheddi Jagan, *The West on Trial, The Fight for Guyana's Freedom*. New York: 1967

Women's movement activists in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana in particular are faced with a climate in which political parties continue to be ethnically defined and periods of general election become times of extreme ethnic polarization. This is despite overwhelming social and cultural collaboration and coexistence at other times. In addition, due to geographic and other reasons related to the differences in patterns of patriarchal authority, the forms and spaces of organisation available to Indo and Afro-Caribbean women vary; social expectations of these women differ in spite of numerous similarities and commonalities between them. In addition to significant differences between both groups of women, there are also significant contradictions and differences which exist within each group. In analysing women's movement activism in this context therefore, it is necessary to understand the historical origins of these divisions, the constructions of identity and citizenship and the ways in which these had been shaped in the colonial and post-colonial periods.

The efforts of both Workingwomen and Red Thread can be seen as attempts at what Nira Yuval-Davis, calls transversal politics. In examining attempts at dialogue among women of different nationalities and ethnicities, she calls for a transversal feminist politics as a corrective to universalist approaches. All feminist politics (and other forms of democratic politics) she argues, should be perceived as a form of coalition politics, "in which the differences among women are recognized and given a voice, without fixating the boundaries of the coalition in terms of 'who' we are but in terms of what we want to achieve." (Yuval-Davis, 1994:188-189). She explains further:

The idea is that each participant brings with her the rooting in her own membership and identity but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different membership and identity. This is called 'transversalism' - to differentiate from 'universalism' which by assuming a homogenous point of departure ends up being exclusive rather than being inclusive (Yuval-Davis, 1994:192-193).

Transversal politics allows one to develop empathy and respect for others although some positions may be reconcilable. Yuval-Davis warns however against the threat of uncritical solidarity or losing one's own perspective, which could result in the homogenising of the experiences of the 'community,' lending support to undemocratic or anti-feminist causes in the name of ethnic solidarity. Where possible, transversal politics could, she argues, prevent some of "the pitfalls of 'identity politics' of all kinds" (Yuval-Davis, 1994:193).

## **Conclusions**

This article sought to critically review the history of women's organising around race in the Anglophone Caribbean. It acknowledges that this has been deliberate throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but has shifted in emphasis, orientation and significance over time. It is predicated on the view, discussed in an earlier publication, that Caribbean feminist understandings of difference must acknowledge the ways in which our contrasted definitions construct the 'other' within ourselves. In order to know ourselves therefore, we need to know our 'other' (Reddock, 2001a). The issues of race, ethnicity, identity and difference have become more poignant now in a social and political atmosphere of heightened identity politics. The continuing weakness of the radical tradition in the

region means that class solidarities are severely challenged and get translated into a language of race.

The women's movement at the same time is facing its own challenges - the influences of a US-dominated globalised media with its own representations of feminist ideas; the problems of generational transition to younger women who are confronted with some of the same issues but in different dress; the backlash against the movement and the increased visibility of religious and ethnic fundamentalist movements which have all served to mediate the positive influences of the movement. As noted by Andaiye in a presentation on Women and Ethnic Conflict:

Even though the efforts that women have made so far to come together across race and party in defence of women who have been abused have yielded little, we have to keep working. Most women are incapable of being as cavalier as most men about "collateral damage" - perhaps because we give birth to and raise and care for the persons who constitute this "collateral damage"... It is clear that for most Guyanese women, the strongest identity they feel is their race/ethnic identity. But maybe, if we see ourselves as women, capable of thinking freely, without party blinders, we can return to the position that we reached so easily when we were organising for Beijing - that the sexual subjugation of women can never, ever, be acceptable to us, whoever the subjugator(s), whatever the cause (Andaiye, 2002).

The continuation of such efforts calls for an atmosphere where the main emotion is not one of guilt or accusation but openness, organisation and commitment to save our societies from the potential ravages of inter-ethnic conflict which we see taking place in other parts of the world. I therefore welcome this opportunity to reflect on where we are politically and theoretically and to learn the lessons of the past.

It is time for a renewed women's movement to take the process further by being leaders in a broad movement against racist and tribalist discourses and practices of inequity. Based on the analyses presented above, Caribbean women are well situated to use their theorising, their historical experience and their activism to develop new socio-political paradigms for our countries and our region which may be applicable to other parts of the world; paradigms which challenge existing stereotypes and allow us to construct broad alliances and coalitions.

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