



The Politics of Memory: Historicizing Caribbean Women's Political Activism

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My talk this evening is about historical memory and what women of the Caribbean as individuals or as a collective, and Caribbean states more broadly, conscious of women's historic contributions, have done with such memory. Memories can be both pleasant and upsetting and what we do with memories depends on the nature of the memories, our distance from them, our philosophy of life, our activism or political commitment and what Fabienne Viala in her excellent book ***The Post-Columbus Syndrome: Identities, Cultural Nationalism and Commemorations in the Caribbean***, calls "the different national templates of memory."¹ "We can adopt a posture of willed ignorance – that is, develop historical amnesia, refusing to remember; or we can remember deliberately and act on them intentionally. It is the project of acting on those memories—should we choose not to forget— that is political about memory.

The influence of politics on memory is seen, for example, in the way history is written and passed on and the tangible sites of memory we construct to remember the past, or the heroes or heroines we advocate for as national icons. In some countries, memorials keep alive the memories of conflict, while others remove the memorials, often for political purposes. For example, I have read that Lithuania removed a Soviet era statue from the city centre of the capital and relocated it to a cemetery, an action that evoked an adverse reaction from Russia. Clearly some governments believe that there is no reason to continue the guilt of the past and that the time has come for getting past the negative historical experiences; this is why some do not support the fight for reparation for historic wrongs/crimes or even allow children to remember through history education. So, the politics of memory is equally shaped by what one wishes to hide or forget. There are reasons to forget and reasons to remember; there are strategies to erase memories and there are strategies to keep them alive. But there are those who argue that forgetfulness equals impunity and that impunity is both morally outrageous and politically dangerous.

There are contested meanings over the definition of the "politics of memory" as the field of "memory studies" expands and becomes increasingly theorised. For

some, the terminology addresses the role of officially elected politicians in shaping [collective memory](#). This is the definition preferred by Peter Verovšek who maintains that ***“political memory should narrow its focus to the operation of politicians, and deal with competing narratives and contested events only insofar as they are raised in clearly political contexts.”***² Though this excludes many cultural factors that are important aspects of collective memory, he holds that studies of both cultural and political memory will benefit from a narrower, conceptually distinct focus. “This decoupling”, he argues, does not preclude their synthesis in later interdisciplinary work, “but... both would benefit from a narrower, more manageable and consistent focus, at least initially.”³

But this association of the “politics of memory” with state actions excludes those who are not in formal politics; who do not see themselves as politicians in the modern sense. So, for me, the **politics of memory** is the political means by which events are remembered and recorded, or discarded, not only by states or politicians as they become involved in shaping collective memory through the construction of public monuments, the declaration of national days, years or decades of memorialisation, or the selection of the narrative about the past for schools and public consumption, but also about what citizens choose to do as a result of their lived experiences; their reading of the past as represented in archival sources and published texts; their reaction to ancestral representations of the past; their reaction to state politics. But such reaction, while it can be collective or individual, must fit the more comprehensive definition of political action.

In this regard, “politics” is broader than, but inclusive of, representational politics and state actions around the issue of memory. It allows for the inclusion of the protest actions by those who are not, never have been or never will be, elected officials; those marginalised groups who must use other means of seeking change.

In November 2014, we heard how activists in Cartagena, Colombia, forced the state to remove a plaque placed there by England's Prince Charles in memory of the British soldiers who died in the battle to take over Cartagena from the Spanish in 1741. The Governor stated that such a plaque was as inappropriate as a bank erecting a plaque to thieves who had robbed it, with support also for the view that the Spanish soldiers who had defended the city had not been so memorialised. The questions of what the Spanish were doing there in the first place and how indigenous Colombians regard the whole matter have been left unanswered.

Fabienne Viala also shows how civil society can force the state to rethink its actions on historical memory in public commemoration. Using the example of the Columbus Quincentenary of 1992, she examines collective memory, national commemorations and the discrepancy between the discourse about national memory officialised by the state and what the people wanted to recognise as their national heritage. Indeed, ordinary citizens in the Caribbean have always forced to the public stage the debates over cultural nationalism and scenarios of remembrance that construct a false sense of Caribbean togetherness.⁴

This is why George Frederickson & Christopher Lasch include resistance and advocacy in their definition of what is political action, insisting that,

“Resistance is a political concept; and political activity in the strictest sense of the word is organised, collective action which aims at affecting the distribution of power in a community. More broadly, it might be said to consist of any activity – of individuals or groups – designed to create a consciousness of collective interest, to subvert the system, to facilitate and regularize escape from it or, at the very least, to force important changes in it.”⁵

They explained their rationale like this: “Among despised and downtrodden people, in general, the most rudimentary form of political action is violence,

based on a common sense of outrage and sometimes inspired by milliennistic ideology....”⁶

According to this definition, when women like Nanny Grigg of Barbados, and Bermudan born Sally Bassett found ways to destabilise the slave system—so outraged were they by the brutality of enslavers— they were engaging in political action. Indeed, Lucille Mathurin Mair reminds us that “the militant acts of Jamaican women were neither isolated nor inadvertent. [Rather] they constituted a political strategy that took different forms at different times but at all times expressed the conscious resolve to confront the New World’s assault on their person and their culture.”⁷

The first female Prime Minister of a CARICOM country, Dame Eugenia Charles – however contested a political figure – admitted that there was a long tradition of women in politics. According to her: “...the coming into official leadership roles is not the commencement of Caribbean women taking the lead in politics and ensuring that the changes that became necessary from time to time took place....”⁸ But because most employ a narrow definition of politics by equating it with representational politics, these pioneering women whose politics took the form of resistance are often ignored; denied access to the corridors of power. The street became their political platform, their House of Representatives.

When we employ a more revolutionary and inclusive definition, however, we see clearly that activism and agency must feature in any discussion of Caribbean women’s politics and they that must be discussed outside of the narrow confines of the post-slavery and post-independence decolonization and feminist movements. In postcolonial societies, issues of freedom, human rights, restorative justice, citizenship and self-determination had to be settled by rebel men and women before the issues of feminism and women’s rights could form a part of the national anti-colonial discourse. Indeed, modern-day women’s movements and feminism cannot be understood without excavating and locating the prior waves of activism and theorizing on women’s conditions dating back centuries.

Long before 1851 at the Women's Convention in that Church in Akron, Ohio, where Sojourner Truth asked 'Ain't I a Woman'?' long before March 8, 1857 in New York, when garment workers protested about inhumane working conditions (and later gave inspiration for International Women's Day); and long before 1977 when UNESCO proclaimed International Women's Day, rebel women in the African Atlantic used a variety of strategies to eradicate (or at least destabilize and subvert) systems of domination. This was especially true after the mid-17th century when, on all sides of the Atlantic, slavery became a more deeply entrenched, restrictive and brutal institution, with fewer possibilities for legal freedom for the majority. Anti-slavery in fact helped the feminist movement, free women seeing in enslavement parallels to their own oppressed conditions on the basis of gender; and developing out of this, arguments for female emancipation.

The pages of Caribbean history are populated with the evidence that many women in the region have chosen to remember and act either on their own memories and their experiences, or on those of their ancestors and mentors. The strategy that many of them have chosen has been that of becoming freedom fighters, activists and advocates. For them, remembrance gives strength, and assists in recuperating the past for the benefit of the present. In the period of modernity, the women were enslaved and free, who acted on their experiences of enslavement to resist its appalling manifestations. In the post-modern period, women activists were those who acted on what they learned about conquest, colonization, enslavement and their legacies. In the contemporary period, all of those historical events, added to our own experiences of racism, sexism and pro-colonialism, have influenced and determined our own politics. We do not have to have been there and experienced unspeakable or unthinkable things to act on memory. There are things that can be understood by those who were not there.

Peter Verovšek reminds us of Barry Goldenshon's thoughts on this when he remarked that, "If an inner understanding of the experience of the victims is out

of reach, at least the behaviour of the perpetrators can be described."¹⁰ When Michael M. Tuvuzzi wrote ***The Politics of Memory: Native historical interpretation of the Colombian Andes, for example***, he did so because his sense of history and the contemporary legacies of Spanish colonialism, even the oral history passed down by ancestral stories, provoked his project. It is such "perpetrator history" that has so agitated many of the women of the Caribbean to act; that has influenced governments of the region to recognise and memorialise Caribbean women.

So how have women of the Caribbean used the memory of the past to energise their politics, with the consequence of sometimes forcing state actions? What have been their alternative strategies to political representation when those become necessary? To explore this topic empirically, I use the lives of three women of the Caribbean: Lucille Mathurin Mair; Dame Eugenia Charles and Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah. These women used academia, representational politics and human rights advocacy to illustrate the power of the politics of memory.

I start with Lucille Mathurin Mair because her work allows us to understand resistance and the politics of decolonization and the role of the historian in shaping collective memory. Eugenia Charles acted on the knowledge of women's subordination under colonialism to assert the right of women to be at the helm of power; and Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah used historical memory to advocate for reparation and influence state actions around the issue of reparatory justice.

The lives of these women and the politics they practiced had certain synergies with the life and politics of Dame Nita Barrow, who is honoured through this Lecture Series. Her actions were driven by historical memory and her experiences of colonialism. She was born at a time when the colonial government held sway and women had few rights; a time when gender functioned as a discriminatory factor in access to education, as well as the

curriculum. Above all, she was born into a family of civic activists and therefore became an activist herself. Who could have been around parents who acted on their sense of outrage at sexism, classism and racism in Barbados and grow up unaffected? Who could have been related to, and observed the work of, Errol Barrow and Garveyite Duncan O'Neal and remained the same? Who would have experienced injustice, as she did at several stages of her life and not broken a plate, as she did at one stage to demonstrate her outrage? Who could have been selected to work at the United Nations and to be involved in work designed to end the evil apartheid system in South Africa and be deemed apolitical? Who would deny the deliberate political action of a woman who sneaked into the township of Alexandra in 1986 disguised in common African garb, putting her safety at risk to secretly see first-hand the conditions of the people even though the area was sealed off by the military to cover up the brutal murders taking place?"¹¹ She left footprints along the way for others to follow and she forced the state to recognise her life and work.

Dame Nita Barrow also had much in common with Mair, Charles and Blake Hannah: women who never declared that they were feminists but who lived or in the case of Blake Hannah, continue to live feminism. Dame Nita Barrow could not have been left untouched by the ideologies and practices of feminism after her challenging appointment in 1983 as Convenor of the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum for the Decade of Women in Nairobi, Kenya. She would eventually declare that "...the wealth of a nation depends on the advancement of its women".¹² That was feminist enlightenment! The same type of feminist enlightenment would later come to Lucille Mathurin Mair as her work demonstrates; change accompanied such enlightenment.

Ambassador Lucille Mathurin Mair – 1924-2009



So, I turn now to the late Ambassador Lucille Mathurin Mair, a pioneer in the fields of history and women and gender studies, who passed away on January 28, 2009. She chose academia as her political strategy to rescue women's political activities from historical obscurity and to redefine the way we view politics. She was conscious that Caribbean history needed to be re-written and that there was need to excavate Black women in particular from deep layers of distortion. She was animated by the reality that "there was nothing in modern historical

scholarship about the women who came before [her]."¹³ That the racist, sexist and authoritarian ideologies of those historians who under the guise of academic objectivity and humanist values, previously attempted to record the Caribbean past needed to be exposed.¹⁴ She understood this silence, writing that: "*...historiography, which has for centuries been a male academic preserve, has been stunningly devoid of a consciousness of women as significant beings*".¹⁵

Her pioneering thesis, "A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica", supervised by Elsa Goveia gave access to the voices, experiences, names and memories of our ancestors and allowed us to have the data we needed to become activists in defense of their rights. As a follow-up to her seminal study, she wrote "The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies During Slavery", which put on the platform the resistance efforts of the enslaved black woman.¹⁶

With these works she wanted to give women new identities and disrupt the trend of viewing them only as inanimate plantation assets, "living in cultural antithesis

to the white plantation".¹⁷ She wanted to test the waters to see if where Goveia used race, ethnic, colour and class lens to peer into Caribbean society, she could use gender to explore whether being female mattered in Caribbean history.

Like other middle class women of her time, Mathurin Mair did not at first define herself as a feminist. In other words, she did not initially admit or recognise the political nature of her work in the interest of gender justice. In a 1990 semi-autobiographical speech, she recounted:

In the early 1960s I started to seek out the women of Jamaica's past during the period of slavery, women of all classes and of all colours, black, brown, white. I had no feminist motivation, or at least none that I recognized. I was motivated mainly by intellectual inquisitiveness, the usual ambition of the doctoral candidate to investigate virgin territory, which it was at that time.¹⁸

However, what Mathurin Mair found in the pages of history as she tried to "decode the mysteries of the black female condition"¹⁹ would not only outrage her and make her wonder at what previous historians had ignored, but forced her to become a "reluctant feminist," as her life after 1974 demonstrated. By her own admission,

"wonderful things happened on the journey into that [female] rebel past [that she explored in her PhD thesis]; I can only briefly indicate the personal process of self-growth it meant; [for] no-one could spend so many years in the company of such women and remain the same. The expansion of one's emotional and intellectual resources, the deepened pride in one's inheritance, and in one's womanhood were inevitable...."²⁰

She certainly did not remain the same. She had embarked on a project of transforming the discipline of History; the completion of the project entailed activism around disseminating the data, mainstreaming gender and transferring knowledge from text to public space. After completing her research and being exposed to the experiences of women of the slavery and immediate post-

slavery periods, she took action to ensure that Caribbean societies would not forget the travails of our ancestor women—that they would not perpetuate the slave relations of production or continue the oppression of women. She also worked with Kamau Brathwaite to provide the Jamaican government with firm historical data that saw Nanny of the Maroons being listed among the pantheon of National Heroes in Jamaica in 1975.²¹ She saw this almost as the triumph of her academic life. “More relevant was the great occasion when a personal conviction about Nanny’s profound significance to the Jamaican psyche became a public reality”, she admitted.²²

She was up against opposition, since Queen Nanny had never been represented by British Historians as the important historical persona that she really was. In fact, as Karla Gottlieb reminds us, early accounts of the Maroons of Jamaica succeeded in making Jamaicans question Nanny’s true identity and the validity of the tales told about her military and political actions against the British. There were Jamaicans who argued that making Nanny a National Heroine was intended to satisfy feminists and would embarrass Jamaica as she never really existed. Mair, Brathwaite, Campbell and others demystified Nanny, locating her firmly in the historical records. They reminded a nation (that had been too swift to dismiss slavery) of the debt they owed to women who not only refused to accept systems of domination but also used all the political strategies at their disposal to contest it.²³

Finding and appreciating Nanny and other women of the slavery era forced her to ask the question Where on earth did such women, the so-called “subordinate sex”, get the nerve [to confront systems of domination?] It came from their very subordination – the moral force of the powerless confronting the powerful – and from their ability to draw strength from that inheritance of ancestral spirits from that other side of the ocean.²⁴

Quoting Herbert Aptheker, she reminded us that “victimization does not simply make victims; it also produces heroes: - *“and heroines too”*²⁵ and she added.

The memory of these women and their brave actions influenced Mathurin Mair's later activities; she became a rebel woman, inspired by conditions of women and took action that would result in their empowerment. Such political action was manifested in her serving in Jamaica as an advisor on developing policies, measures and programmes intended to advance the status of its women and fully integrate them in the process of development. She was an advisor on Women's Affairs, Head of the Jamaican Information Service in 1974 and Deputy Head of Jamaica's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in 1975.

Mathurin Mair was also active in the development of the Women and Development Studies groups, which were formed in 1982 at the University of the West Indies to promote the introduction of Women's Studies courses and programmes within the academy. She was the first regional coordinator for the Project of Cooperation in Teaching, Research and Outreach in Women and Development Studies from 1986-1989 and was a founding member of the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). She was instrumental in the establishment of the Centres for Gender and Development Studies – now the IGDS – across the three campuses of the University of the West Indies.

Mathurin Mair took her advocacy for the recognition and the rights of women to the international stage as an international diplomatic figure. She was Assistant Secretary-General in the office of the United Nations Secretariat in 1979. She performed the role of Secretary-General of the World Conference on the United Nations Decade for Women in 1980 in Copenhagen, Denmark. From 1981 to 1982, she served as the Secretary-General's Advisor to UNICEF on Women's Development and between 1982 and 1987; she was the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Palestine. In 1982, she was the first woman to hold the title of Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations. She was later appointed Senator and Minister of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jamaica and in 1992 was the Permanent Representative for Jamaica to the United Nations.

Knowledge of the Caribbean past has not remained the same since Mathurin Mair's work. Indeed, she paved the way for numerous other studies of women that allowed Caribbean societies to know about and act on such knowledge. Thanks to her work and the influence she exerted on other historians, we can now respond to her call to sing praise songs to the Taino and Kalinago women who joined their men to protest European colonization and pioneered the culture of resistance in the Maroon women. These are women like Nanny of Jamaica and Charlotte and Angelique of Dominica, who so ably destabilised British colonialism; Nanny Grigg of Barbados, who along with Bussa struggled to end one of the greatest crimes against humanity in Barbados in 1816; Alida of Suriname and Betto Douglas of St. Kitts/Nevis who in 1825 demonstrated the power of hunger strike while in the stocks; Philda, Queen and Aba of Antigua; Charlotte, Angelique, Tranquille and Calypso of Dominica – rebel women who embodied the spirit of Black women's resistance to systems of domination; and Whaunica, referred to by 18th and 19th century writers on Jamaica as a female demon, who thwarted the overseers in the field and fomented “petticoat rebellion.”

Mathurin Mair introduced us to women who used body language and dress (or undress), much as Eugenia Charles would do later, to register their discontent with discriminatory systems and policies. Mathurin Mair also introduced us to domestic women who found various ways to harass, frustrate and even poison their enslavers; to women like Sally Bassett of Bermuda who was burned at the stake in 1730 because she refused to collaborate with the system of slavery, but whose statue now, however controversially, stands tall on the front lawns of the parliament building in Bermuda.

She urges us to sing praise songs to women who joined strikes to negotiate for rights and used economic resistance to carve out a niche for themselves within the confines of slavery. These include women like the emancipationist Mary Prince who opposed the gradualism of Wilberforce and participated in armed struggle. Among these fights were the 1692 African-Barbadian protest in which 51 enslaved people were executed, 4 of them women; the Haitian Revolution of 1791 in which Cécile Fatima played a critical role; the 1736 protest in Antigua led by (now

National Hero) Court, alias Tacky, and his Creole co-conspirator, Tomboy, the 1816 war in Barbados; the 1824 war in Demerara; the 1824 plot in Jamaica; and the 1831 anti-slavery war in Jamaica which has been credited with forcing Britain to end slavery.

We must sing praise songs for women whose revolutionary ideology and programme were clearly anchored in their experience and in their sense of what had become, as Rex Nettleford often terms it, a derided and emasculated ancestral culture.²⁶ We must sing praise songs for black working class women who, in the post-slavery century of racial apartheid and sexism, made it clear that they had no intention of conforming to the Victorian gender order and the gender systems of the new era that sought to confine women to the private sphere of uncompensated labour in the home and promote the male as breadwinner ideology. Mathurin Mair forced us to recognize women like Mary Seacole who defied the gender conventions of the day to show that Caribbean women could roam and hold their own in foreign lands.

Women protested Crown Colony rule and lobbied for the franchise across the region; and from Belize to the Bahamas, joined in the labour protests of the 1930s and demanded political rights—such as the right to join Unions as well as the right to vote and participate in representational politics.

Mathurin Mair also sang praise songs to the women writers of the post-modern period who also engaged in their own acts of self-affirmation; exploring history, myth and memory and seeking cultural continuities.

Dame Eugenia Charles



I have long followed the career of Dame Eugenia Charles as part of my interest in the lives of Caribbean women who have defied the gender, class and racial conventions that historically kept them below the proverbial glass ceiling—especially in the realm of politics. I cannot say that I have supported all of her political actions and ideologies, because her politics as the Prime Minister of post-independence Dominica have been conservative and problematic to those with radical and leftist political leanings. In this regard, her support of a USA invasion of Grenada in 1983 continues to stick in my throat. But women at the helm of Caribbean political leadership have been so rare that I must admit I cheered when she became Prime Minister of Dominica in 1980 – the first Caribbean woman to rise to such a position. Years later, I made her one of the women to be studied in detail by UWI students reading the undergraduate course, “Women and Gender in the History of the British-colonised Caribbean” introduced in 1993— coincidentally, the same year that Janet Higbie’s biography of Eugenia Charles was published.²⁷ I wanted to introduce students to strong Caribbean women who overcame the obstacles placed in their way to rise to positions of power and influence in the region. This is regardless of the type of scholarship on gender and power (now highly contested in any case), that claim many female leaders do not revolutionise the way in which they exercise power. In fact, it is argued that they tend to associate with masculine leadership styles, troped as aggressive, hierarchical and inflexible instead of participative and responsive – the “power over” (domination in a zero-sum game) rather than the “power with and to” (empowerment; a shared and cooperative effort).²⁸

Some associate Eugenia Charles with the former definition of power. At the same time, her 1993 biography opened my students' eyes to stories and images of Charles they had not previously encountered. I suspect that they do not fit the dominant images the media uses to support her "iron lady" stereotype -- a stereotype that sought to defeminise and ridicule her. The Higbie-authored biography almost cancelled out the negatives of her Republican-style conservatism that so concerned some segments of Caribbean society, including her supporters. It introduced readers to her rebelliousness as a child; her defiance of gender conventions, manifested in recreational and social preferences; her radicalism as a young student in Canada; an unwillingness to conform to overseas racial politics by demanding to be served in restaurants in the US, sitting at the front of a bus and refusing to move to an assigned position in the back 13 years before Rosa Parks made that type of resistance legendary. Higbie's account reminded us of Charles' strong support of women's concerns and her intolerance of undemocratic laws and practices. It explained what animated her entry into representational politics and why she would defy protocol and appear in a bathing suit in Parliament to protest sexist dress codes. She took that defiance of the dress code, although not to the same extreme, to President Reagan's Press Conference where her so-called "jangling African bracelets" would defy the 'dress for success Washington dress code'.²⁹

My brief foray into the Dame Eugenia Charles collection in the Library on the Cave Hill campus cemented some of these impressions in my mind. Between the pages of that collection, I met a feisty woman who was a shining example to the women of the Caribbean that we could be what we wanted. Admittedly, Charles never labelled herself a feminist or a women's "libber," because as far as she was concerned her causes were universal human rights causes. In her article, "The Reluctant Feminist: Eugenia Charles on Women and Gender", Alicia Mondesire begins with the following quote from Charles: "I don't think that I am a feminist, really; I just felt that women had the right to do what they wanted to do. Men couldn't think they had the world in their pocket".³⁰ She is also reported to have said in an Interview in *People*: "In Dominica we really live women's

liberation; we do not have to expound it", that is, wear it on the sleeves, so to speak. In fact, she seems to have been impatient with women whose feminist politics meant that they could not accept a seat offered to them in public by men;³¹ women who declared that they were feminists and who, in her words, "have made advancement in many fields of life" but were not "prepared to assist their sisters to continue with that advancement and take advantage of the lessons we have learned in advancing ourselves...."³²

However, I must stress that despite her protestations, she demonstrated feminist thinking. She never subscribed to the women as the weaker sex narrative and by her very support many Women's organisations such as The Council of Women Leaders, the International Women's Forum and The Caribbean Institute for Democratic Women, she provided an example of what women could become if they had the will and did the necessary preparation.

Charles' experiences testify that, tiny as they were in 1980, cracks were appearing in the political glass ceiling and she encouraged more cracks by promoting competent women into political positions under her leadership.

Among Eugenia Charles' papers, I met a woman who refused to be cowed by imperial and neo-imperial forces; a woman confident enough to stare down the neo-imperialist forces threatening to undermine Caribbean independence; a woman who once wrote to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to state her opposing views on the Apartheid regime in South Africa. While indicating that she understood why Mrs Thatcher held the views on the matter that she did, Charles nevertheless told her, "You already know my view on apartheid in South Africa – they are diametrically opposed to yours...;"³³ and at a Greenpeace Press Conference held on the Arctic Sunrise anchored off Dominica during a Caribbean campaign to get a whaling sanctuary vote passed, she told the organisers to "go to hell" when they tried to pressure the Eastern Caribbean. There seemed to have been a veiled threat that if the EC

voted with Japan (who was pressuring them to oppose the sanctuary), they would be voting against their tourist industry.

These actions and ideologies of a strong Caribbean woman forced me to ask: who inspired Eugenia Charles? Which icons gave her courage to defy conventions, making her a virtual cross between revolutionary and conservative? Who influenced that taken-for-granted attitude of hers which made her refuse to acknowledge the novelty of being a female Prime Minister and party leader? In an interview with Eudine Barriteau, she said: "When persons ask me, 'how you feel about being the first woman Prime Minister of the Caribbean?' I say, I just wonder why it took so long to be the first, because in fact our women have always stood out strong."³⁴ From whence came her outrage at injustice? Her anti-colonial stance? Her unending battle with authority?

I am not sure, but I have tried to follow some of clues that she left behind. By her own admission, a firm belief in free speech was nurtured by her family. She grew up in a household that did not silence girls' voices, a household "in which perhaps my first abstract thought was built on the slogan 'no taxation without representation'",³⁵ –which incidentally had been a woman's slogan across the region from the late 19th century. She also had many female mentors.

I also submit that as a student of History, she was influenced by the women whose politics came to the fore because of the work of Lucille Mathurin Mair and those who followed in her footsteps. These scholars engaged in historical archaeology to introduce us to women who are now among the pantheon of Caribbean icons. ; They include Garveyite women who lobbied for Universal Adult Suffrage and black self-determination; women who founded or co-founded Trade Unions and political parties or women's arms of political parties; women who contested elections, won seats and participated in representational politics. Whether in formal or non-representational politics, Charles demonstrated the politics of memory in her activism and advocacy.

Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah



I come finally to Barbara Makeda Blake-Hannah – writer, film-maker, cultural activist and Director of the Jamaica International Film Festival and the best example of a woman for whom the politics of memory influenced her participation in the reparation movement and the search for rights and respect for Rastafari.

While most people know about Trevor McDonald and Moira Stuart as early black TV news presenters in the UK (starting in 1973 and 1981 respectively) few recall that Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah made headlines in British newspapers in 1968 when she was appointed one of three on-camera reporters/interviewers on Thames-TV's daily evening show, "Today" with Eamonn Andrews. It was the first time a black person had appeared on British TV in a non-entertainment role.

By her own admission, "after nine months ... my contract was terminated and I was told that the producers were under pressure from viewers who called in daily to say, "Get that n****r off our screens."³⁶

She worked with ATV-Birmingham's "Today Show", aired in a time when Enoch Powell had made black immigration a major issue. As a result of the racist environment in which she found herself in Birmingham, she could not get a hotel room in the city and had to return each night to London and commute each morning by train to Birmingham until she finally got a room at the YWCA. She also recalls "coming back to the studio after doing a story on a miserably cold

day to find that Enoch Powell had just left after doing a live interview on condition that 'the black girl' was not there."³⁷ She also writes that she had to "listen without reacting when the production staff asked: 'What 'wog' (a racial slur to describe immigrants with dark skin) story are we doing today?'"³⁸ "Or: "If black people are so equal, how come they never painted the Mona Lisa?"³⁸

Her next job, which she described as "pleasant", was as a research assistant with the BBC "Man Alive" series produced by Desmond Wilcox. But after a few months, Chris Blackwell and Perry Henzell offered her a job as a public relations officer for the first Jamaican film, "The Harder They Come", and she decided it was time to return home permanently in 1972. Her first area of activism was in the fight to get "ganja" legalized.

She has since continued her career as a journalist by writing columns, hosting TV and radio broadcasts and making films on issues of culture and black history. She was also a former Senator in the Jamaican parliament and used that position to push for causes she was passionate about. Her role in calling for reparation for Caribbean slavery directly influenced my involvement in the movement. I believe that her experience of racism in the UK, her uncompromising stand against injustice and the education she received from history determined her activism.

She was part of the Jamaican delegation at the 2001 anti-racism conference in Durban and worked with the Caribbean and other delegations there to insist that no conference on racism could proceed without placing reparations on the agenda. This included reparations not just for slavery and native genocide, but also justice for the Indian Dalits or so-called "untouchables" and repatriation for Rastafari. She would also head the Jamaica Reparation Movement and publish accounts of her work on reparation. Below are excerpts from an interview she gave on her work on reparation and the challenges she faced:

I wrote articles, I went on the radio, I called meetings and spent about four, five years literally trying to get everybody interested in joining an ... active movement for reparations. What really made me very sad was how little response I received including from the Rastafari bases in Jamaica. I

remember going to Fi Wi Sinting and took up a booth to try and get signatures and a petition. I got twenty-four signatures. I remember calling a national meeting at the University. In 2003 that meeting was called. I got twenty-eight people attending. Even the people who would speak the loudest, you know, on a radio programme on reparations... they never came around and helped. There were no artistes who would say let me keep a show so we could raise some funds.

The debate lasted for three weeks in parliament. Three successive weeks. But what I found very sad again on those three occasions I was the only Rasta in Gordon House. Because I had been a senator, I served as a senator 1984 to '87; that means that whenever I go to parliament, I literally sit against the wall where the speaker sits. I have a very privileged seat in the house itself; but it wasn't till the third and final meeting Mike Henry had brought Filmore Alveranga, who as you know is not a dreadlocks. So he sat upstairs in the public gallery and no one would even know that a Rasta was there. I was very disappointed to see the lack of support because I would have thought that Rastas would have been on the corner with drums, drumming and trying to get upstairs to sit in the public gallery.. Nobody was there.

And the word hardly got out but a decision was taken as a result of that parliamentary debate to set up a parliamentary committee on reparations. That was set up with Professor Chevannes as head of it. I am not privy to what has happened to it now because we hear nothing about it really. Shortly after the debate in parliament the Jamaica Labour Party won the election, in 2007 and I was invited to join the ministry of culture as a consultant, which I did. I made certain recommendations to the minister for the setting up of the committee and the parameters of the committee.³⁹

She is no longer now active in the reparations movement even though she remains convinced about the rightness of the cause. I think the lack of support she describes and her own pertinent and complex questions about the future of the movement and the seeming impossibility of any resolution have influenced her decision. However, other women of Jamaica, including those she brought into the movement, are carrying on the struggle.

I am not sure about the extent to which women in Barbados are a part of the reparation movement in an effort to force Caribbean states to act politically on the memory of conquest, colonization and the continuing legacies of African enslavement and indigenous peoples economic marginalization. But I maintain that there are legitimate reasons to be involved, not least the memory of what your female ancestors went through during their enslavement and the century of racial apartheid that followed. For sure there was no sisterly love under capitalism and enslavement. Under slavery, women owned other women; women oppressed other women; women profited from the labour of other women and women claimed compensation on other women.

The examples are evident for Barbados as for other Caribbean countries. We now know from the evidence provided by the University College London (UCL) team working on the compensation claims that this was not a male enterprise. The team, led by Professor Catherine Hall, remind us that in the Caribbean, roughly 40-50% of the claimants were women; and 25% of the people in Britain who received compensation were women. In Barbados there were 5,344 claims submitted, 2,143 filed by women,⁴⁰ supporting Hilary Beckles' and Pedro Welch's findings that a large number of women in Barbados were enslavers, mostly in the urban spaces.⁴¹ Among resident claimants, however, there were 420 males compared to 82 female.

The following Tables provide a brief idea of who some of these women were, the number of enslaved people for whom they claimed and the amount for which they filed. Some of these claims were contested so the total settlement of each claim is uncertain. What we know is that in the end, Barbadian enslavers received a pay-out of £1,711,345.19.7 on 82,807 enslaved Africans, plus the payment represented by the 4 year Apprenticeship, estimated by Beckles at £27 million for the entire British-colonized Caribbean.⁴²

Table 1: Top Ten Resident Female Claimants in Barbados:

Name	Estate	Amount Claimed	# of Enslaved
Mary Salter Dehany	Salters	£4361 11S 9D	205
Mary Elizabeth Datzell	Buttalls	£3825 12S 5D	176
Margaret Foderingham	Hopewell	£3808 3S 11D	191
Mary Jane Callender	Hopefield	£3334 6S 2D	154
Catherine Ann Smitten	Mangrove Pond	£3213 18S 1D	146
Margaret Ann Bend	Pleasant Hall	£2922 12S 4D	136
Ann Goodridge	Mount Brevitor	£2604 2S 10D	115
Sarah Goodridge	Mount Brevitor	£2604 2S 10D	115
Anna Maria Graham	Bourbon	£2075 18S 8D	93
Mary Ann Everley	Worthing View	£2033 4S 3D	94

Table 2: Female Absentee Owners (£4,000 and Above)

Name	Estate	Amount Claimed	# of Enslaved
Sarah Oxley Cadogen	Harrow	£4691	211
	Crab Hill	£2693	133
	Pickerings	£3864	171
		£11248	515
Elizabeth Jones	Cleland	£5348	146
Dame Mary Nagle	Hall	£4002	177
Wilhelmina Barbara Traill	Salters	£4361	205
Ann Trotman (Nee Hamilton)	Carmichaels	£3926	178
	Bulkeleys	£5080	231
		£9006	409
Rt. Hon Anne Margaret Viscountess	Lewis (Lear's)	£6956	325

Table 3: Sample of other women who claimed for and received compensation

Name	Estate	Amount Claimed	# of Enslaved
Mary Judith Adamson	Eclipse	£16S 2D	31
Joanna Alleyne	Barbados	£104 17S 3D	6
Hester Ames	Barbados	£776 15S 8D	37
Dorathy Jordan Chandler	Fairview	£895 4S 7D	48
Katherine Chase	Stanmore	£1023 9S 11D	52
Mary Clarke	Barbados	£1242 15S 11D	57
Sarah Julianna Cummins	Halletts	£580 12S 8D	35
Sarah E. Downes	Middleton	£638 17S 11D	33
Ann Estwick	Barbados	£908 16S 6D	44
Susanna T. Alsop	Edgehill	£1862 6S 5D	79

Anna Maria Graham	Bourbon	£2075 18S 8D	93
Mary Hayes	Barbados	£607 16S 6D	35
Mary Higginbotham	Barbados	£29 2S 7D	1
Jane N. Hunt	Barbados	£221 7S 7D	10
Elizabeth Ann Manning	Pleasant Hall	£679 18S 4D	43
Jane Massiah	Barbados	£638 17S 11D	31
Sarah E. Reece	Woodland	£417 10S 5D	20
Frances Springer	Barbados	£761 3S 10D	42
Elizabeth Walcott	Barbados	£708 14S 5D	34
Malvina Williams	Barbados	£77 13S 6D	4

Very few women were among those who received the largest pay-outs; and this is illustrated by Table 4 showing the claimants that received over £6000.

Table 4: Absentee (Male) Claimants in Barbados (Over £6000):

Absentee Owners	Plantation	Compensation	# of Enslaved
James Heywood Markland	Codrington	£8558 2S 2D	410
Robert Bright	Barbados	£7247 6S 0D	341
Henry Bush	Barbados	£7247 6S 0D	341
John Cobham	Barbados	£7247 6S 0D	341
George Hillhouse	Barbados	£7247 6S 0D	341
Sir George Anson	Lewis (Lears) Plantation	£6956 0S 4D	325
Edward Anson	Lewis (Lears) Plantation	£6956 0S 4D	325
Thomas Daniel	Lewis (Lears) Plantation	£6956 0S 4D	325
John Daniel	Lewis (Lears) Plantation	£6956 0S 4D	325
William Hinds Prescod	Searies	£6936 11S 11D	330

I leave it to the Barbados reparation committee to study the claims further, especially for biographical details, within the context of the CARICOM 10-point action plan for reparatory justice for Caribbean slavery and native genocide – which is, of course, much broader than financial compensation.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, whether leaders of the post-modern Caribbean want to admit it or not, they all owe a debt of gratitude to the historical legacy left by Caribbean women activists who went before them and influenced their politics. Let us ensure we do not forget the women who forced Eugenia Charles to admit that, "Long before the women got the vote in Dominica, and certainly ages before adult suffrage, women played a dynamic role in politics, in social services and in education;"⁴³ women who used their metaphorical, and real, cutlasses to clear the path so that we could now have an easier road; women who held that every form of control generates an opposing struggle for liberation; women who said, like Harriet Jacobs, "My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each".⁴⁴ They too engaged in the politics of Memory. They left markers in the past that have allowed us to remember them in the present. To be remembered and memorialised in the future, you have to leave a marker in the present.

Some argue that the current obsession with the past seems to confirm Friedrich Nietzsche's appraisal that "we are all suffering from a malignant historical fever..."⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Peter Verovsek reminds us, Jacques Derrida noted that recent events signify "*a universal urgency of memory*"⁴⁶ and goes further to suggest that the meanings attributed to the past are a key component of identities.

I agree with Verovsek that our understanding of the past has strategic, political, and ethical consequences. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* note that contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward."⁴⁷ Though the content of the politics of memory is rooted in past events, the illocutionary meaning, the desired communicative effect of this discourse, is clearly directed and motivated by contemporary

politics – which is why the field of memory studies is not the preserve of historians and is in fact distinct from history.⁴⁸

Verovšek records, for example, that in the book *Los funerals de la Mamá Grande*, Columbian novelist Gabriel García Márquez declares that he must tell his story of remembrance “before the historians have time to arrive.”⁴⁹ But although memory is conceptually and functionally distinct from history and the line between the two is slippery, History can inform politics.

¹ Fabienne Viala, *The Post-Columbus Syndrome: Identities, Cultural Nationalism and Commemorations in the Caribbean* (Palgrave, McMillan, New York, 2014), 3.

² Peter Verovšek “The Politics of Memory: A Conceptual Approach to the Study of Memory in Politics,” <http://www.scribd.com/doc/177692024/Verovsek-The-Politics-of-Memory>

³ Verovšek, “The Politics of Memory,” 29.

⁴ Viala, *The Post-Columbus Syndrome*.

⁵ George Frederickson & Christopher Lasch, “Resistance to Slavery,” *Civil War History* 4 (1967): 317, 318.

⁶ Frederickson & Lasch, “Resistance to Slavery,” 317.

⁷ Lucille Mathurin Mair, “Recollections into the Journey of a Rebel Past,” in Selwyn R. Cudjoe, ed., *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* (Wellesley, Mass: Calaloux Publications, 1990), reprinted in Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica, 1655-1845*, ed. Hilary Beckles & Verene Shepherd (Kingston: The UWI Press, 2007), 327.

⁸ Eugenia Charles, “The Experiences of the First Female Prime Minister in the Commonwealth Caribbean”, The 1st Dame Nita Barrow Memorial Lecture, Cave Hill, Barbados, November 3, 1995, in the Dame Nita Barrow Collection (hereafter DNBC), UWI Library, Cave Hill.

⁹ W. Terry Whalin, *Sojourner Truth, American Abolitionist* (Ohio: Barbour Publications. Inc, 1997) 129.

¹⁰ See Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: the journey of a holocaust historian* (Chicago: Ivan Dee 1996); and for evidence of such “perpetrator histories” See Ana Lucia Arajuos, *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (Routledge: New York, 2012).

¹¹ Francis Blackman, *Dame Nita: Caribbean Woman, World Citizen* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1995), vii.

¹² Blackman, *Dame Nita*, 19.

¹³ Mair, “Recollections,” in *A Historical Study*, 318.

¹⁴ Mair, "Recollections," in *A Historical Study*, 321.

¹⁵ Mair, "Recollections," in *A Historical Study*, 318.

¹⁶ Lucille Mathurin Mair, *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies During Slavery* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica Publications Limited, 1975).

¹⁷ Mair, *A Historical Study*, viii.

¹⁸ Mair, "Recollections," in *A Historical Study*, 318.

¹⁹ Mair, "Recollections," in *A Historical Study*, 319.

²⁰ Mair, "Recollections," in *A Historical Study*, 326.

²¹ See Kamau Brathwaite, *Wars of Respect: Nanny and Sam Sharpe* (Kingston: Jamaica Agency for Public Information, National Heritage Week Committee, 1976) 18.

²² Mair, "Recollections," in *A Historical Study*, 326.

²³ Karla Gottlieb, *A History of Queen Nanny: the Mother of Us All* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2000), Chapter 6; See also Mavis Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal* (Granby MA, : Bergin & Garvey, 1988); See also Beverley Carey, *The Maroon Story* (St. Andrew: Agouti Press, 1997 and Carey Robinson, *The Fighting Maroons of Jamaica* (Kingston: William Collins and Sangsters, 1974).

²⁴ Mair, "Recollections," *A Historical Study*, 327.

²⁵ Herbert Atheker, in "Recollections," *A Historical Study*, 327.

²⁶ Verene Shepherd, "Learning from Historical Tragedy to Combat Racial Discrimination Today" (Keynote speech delivered at the United Nations on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, New York, March 20, 2015).

²⁷ Janet Higbie, *Eugenia Charles: the Caribbean's Iron Lady* (London: McMillan, 1993).

²⁸ Lois Duke, *Women in Politics: Insiders or Outsiders?* (New York: Pearson Longman, 4thedn , 2006).

²⁹ Higbie, *Eugenia Charles*, 8.

³⁰ Alicia Mondesire, "The Reluctant Feminist: Eugenia Charles on Women & Gender", in EudineBarriteau & Alan Cobby, eds., *Enjoying Power: Eugenia Charles & Political Leadership in the Commonwealth Caribbean* (Kingston: The UWI Press, 2006) 259.

³¹ Interview with Peter Richards in the "Women of the Hemisphere" Issue of *Américas*, (Sept-Oct 1985) 28-30, in Box 37, The Dame Eugenia Charles Papers (hereafter DECP), UWI Library, Cave Hill.

³² *Ibid.*, DECP, Box 74.

³³ Eugenia Charles to Margaret Thatcher, September 8, 1986, in Box 8, DECP

³⁴ Eudine Barriteau, "Contestations and Contradictions: The Political and Economic Leadership of Eugenia Charles," The 1st Dame Eugenia Charles Memorial Lecture, Dominica, 2006.

³⁵ Charles, "The Experiences of the First Female Prime Minister in the Commonwealth Caribbean", 1.

³⁶ Barbara Blake Hannah, October 23 2008, In response: "It wasn't Trevor or Moira – I was the first black British TV presenter," *The Black History Timeline*, October 13 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/oct/23/television-raceandreligion>.

³⁷ Hannah, in response: "It wasn't Trevor or Moira."

³⁸ Hannah, in response: "It wasn't Trevor or Moira."

³⁹ Hannah Makeda Blake Barbara. Interview. "Let's talk Reparations."

⁴⁰ Nicholas Draper. "'Possessing Slaves': Ownership, Compensation and Metropolitan Society in Britain at the time of Emancipation 1834-40," *History Workshop Journal*, 64 (2007): 78.

⁴¹ Hilary Beckles; Pedro Welch. "Urban Context of the Slave Plantation System, Bridgetown, Barbados, 1680-1834" (PhD. Diss., University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, 1995).

⁴² Hilary Beckles' speech before the British House of Commons, House of Commons, Parliament of Great Britain, Thursday July 16. 2014. 9:00 pm

⁴³ Charles, "The Experiences of the First Female Prime Minister"

⁴⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2001) 73.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985) 4, in Peter Verovšek, "The Politics of Memory," 4.

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 28; For more on Derrida's views on the international politics of memory and forgiveness, see, Michael Janover, "The Limits of Forgiveness and the Ends of Politics," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26, no. 3 (2005), 221-235, quoted in Peter Verovšek, "The Politics of Memory," 4.

⁴⁷ Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 1, in Peter Verovšek, "The Politics of Memory," 4.

⁴⁸ Verovsek, "The Politics of Memory," 4-5.

⁴⁹ Gabriel García Márquez, *Los funerales de la Mamá Grande* in Verovsek, 10. but quoted in Joanne Rappaport, *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.