



Inescapable Entanglements: Notes on Caribbean Feminist Engagement

IGDS 20th Anniversary Keynote Address, 2013

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Prof. Alissa Trotz, delivering the keynote address, at the IGDS 20th Anniversary celebration, Learning Resource Centre, The UWI, St. Augustine Campus, November 2013.

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Introduction

It is an incredible honour to have been invited to share this twentieth birthday of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies. I would like to thank the faculty, staff and students for their amazing warmth and hospitality. Let me take this opportunity to also recognize Professor Barbara Bailey, whose commitment to gender equality is manifested not just in her contribution as Regional Coordinator of the IGDS, but in the work she has accomplished nationally, regionally and internationally. In particular, Professor Bailey's commitment to education and the foundational texts in Caribbean Gender Studies that she has co-authored/co-edited are an amazing legacy for generations of scholars to come.

We know that the IGDS was a dimension of women's and feminist activism in the Caribbean, from WAND to CAFRA, from Sistren to NUDE. We had taken our struggle to the academy, making these institutional spaces the site of our demands for recognition. Today the IGDS boasts a regional programme with a superb publication record, training undergraduate and graduate students, initiating collaborations with academic partners and communities. It extends itself to wider communities, whether it is the open access feminist journal at St Augustine, the work at Mona with Haitian colleagues after the earthquake to develop a certificate programme in Gender Studies, or the Summer Institute in Gender Studies at Cave Hill which brings together university students, farmers, civil servants, community activists and police officers from across the region.

But I do not want to run the risk of daring to name a tradition, happily an impossible task, for it is immense, non-linear and incredibly diverse. Instead I hope that the richness of the well from which I draw and the intellectual debt we owe to so many of you here today becomes evident in my reflections.

The establishment of the IGDS offered visibility at a moment in which free market fundamentalism was the new mantra, with its well-documented and devastating

consequences for women. The collapse of the Berlin Wall inaugurated end of history narratives, although in the Caribbean our end of history moment came with the implosion of the Grenada Revolution just thirty years ago last month. When a doctor gives you medicine and the ailment persists or get worse, the standard practice is to at least change the prescription. Yet three decades later we continue to take the same bitter pill of structural adjustment. The moment of institutionalization, then, came with its own urgent imperatives, underlining the necessity of the work done, being done and which we are still to do.

And it is an uphill battle. We see this in the anxieties about boys and men—a critical concern, to be sure, but one that has far too frequently diagnosed male marginalization as the consequence of women's achievements, as Eudine Barriteau has shown. In the face of the work being done to increase women's political participation, we can almost taste the backlash. Three weeks ago, a Government Minister in Barbados, responding to criticism by the female opposition leader, stated, "We're now only left to see her strip naked and run down Broad Street in her attempt to get attention." In Belize, a senior male parliamentarian unleashed a verbal assault on the only female parliamentarian that included references to male genitals and suggestions that she was "asking for it." At this year's Gender Institute in Barbados, students spoke of a calypso on the topic of women sacking men, where the word 'sack' suggested not only that women owed their rise through the ranks to the performance of sexual favours (so powerfully described by Singing Sandra in *Die With My Dignity*), but that they were now on top, with the power to both fire and sexually harass men. So much of our popular culture reinforces this sense of women out of place, like the glorification of alcoholism and domestic violence in the chutney song *Rum Till I Die* or the calypso hit, *Kick In She Back Door*.

This work is being done in a climate of public cutbacks, creating competition for scarce resources on a turf that is seeing NGOs playing an increasingly important role. While many NGOs are doing extremely valuable work, we know too that we have been forced to ask difficult questions about the consequences of an ever

growing reliance on donor funding, requiring us to constantly navigate the script that others would write for us. The identification of gender as a 'priority area' brings a certain visibility, but an approach that thinks of projects with finite ends, definite boundaries and carefully calculated numbers of beneficiaries will never square with the complicated, messy trajectories of movement building.

At a public lecture at the Caribbean Studies Association in Grenada this past June, Merle Collins suggested that we need "revolutionary thinking to grapple with the contradictions that shape us." Today I want to bring that spirit of revolutionary praxis to reflect on these contradictions, via a detour through a few cases that have recently made their way through national, regional and hemispheric legal systems. As feminist legal scholar Tracy Robinson has pointed out, law is "...a significant medium through which the Caribbean is imagined as a space to which some belong and not others." If we think of our efforts as drawing on our deepest desires to create what Guyanese poet Martin Carter memorably described as 'a free community of valid persons,' then indeed the law is a key site of the struggle for women's rights and gender equality. Engagement, however, requires us to grapple with some major contradictions. This is not a detailed exposition of matters before the courts, but a reflection that variously highlights aspects of a legal judgment, a context that haunts it, and the representational issues surrounding a case, thinking aloud about the lessons here for our commitments to gender equality across the institutional spaces we encounter (and I would like to thank my colleague from the Faculty of Law here, Arif Bulkan, whose work relates directly to what I am going to say).

The first case has given the faltering regional integration movement a much-needed boost. On Friday October 4, the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) rendered its decision in the case of Shanique Myrie, a Jamaican national who, having been detained, humiliated, made to undergo a body cavity search and ultimately deported by the Barbados immigration authorities, filed an action against the State of Barbados. The CCJ awarded Myrie damages, upholding her

right (and the right of CARICOM nationals) to enter CARICOM Member States hassle-free under the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas.

When I first heard the judgment my immediate impulse was to think of challenging students to popularize the decision, like creating postcards that could be made cheaply and handed out to travellers at airports informing Caribbean folk of their rights. Several innovative mechanisms are already in place for this kind of dissemination practice: Gabrielle Hosein's introductory Women and Gender Studies class that incorporates an activist component; Verene Shepherd's radio show, Talking History; Carolyn Cooper's weekly column in the Sunday Gleaner; Patricia Mohammed's engagement with the communicative power of film; CODE RED for Gender Justice's use of social media to inform, exchange ideas and strategize (what Honor Ford-Smith calls the modern day bush telegram).

There is much to celebrate, beginning always with the courage and determination of Shanique Myrie. But I want to encourage a discussion that can accommodate both celebration and the lingering concerns that remain. The most obvious tempering of our joy comes from the earlier decision of the Constitutional Tribunal of the Dominican Republic, to potentially strip citizenship from hundreds of thousands of persons of Haitian descent who were born in the country as far back as 1929. This outrage must be challenged for what it is: an attack on the citizenship rights of a group of Dominicans that comes out of a long history of discriminatory treatment of Haitians and Haitian-descended Dominicans. But our opposition should also be the occasion for us to avoid concluding that we are superior in light of the CCJ ruling. I am not sure that the rest of the Caribbean is so completely different from the DR in the degrading treatment that Haitians and Haitian-descendants receive. We are, after all, the very same CARICOM family that requires Haitians to have visas in hand before they set foot in many other member states, and this despite the fact that Haiti has been a full member of the Caribbean Community since 2002. Just for starters, will the CCJ judgment affect our own thinking on this matter?

We might also reflect on the significance of the Government of Jamaica joining the case as an intervener, which in layperson's terms I understand means a third party with an interest in the case. We might think about how to read the official national interest in the violation of Shanique Myrie, against a context in which the regional integration narrative is also about whether Jamaica is short-changed by CARICOM, a conversation that goes all the way back to the failed Federation but comes up today in relation to subjects like trade imbalances and the fate of Air Jamaica. In short, did the case provide an opportunity to present one country as an aggrieved member of a regional family, a national body that had been violated, disappearing the embodied violations that Shanique Myrie experienced?

Relatedly, I have been grappling with my discomfort with the way in which Shanique Myrie is described in the regional press as ushering in "a victory for all CARICOM citizens." True, this decision officially affirms intra-regional travel practices, but we need to reflect carefully on what all this symbolism means. To offer just one example one columnist concluded "...while the case gave redress to Myrie for her grievances, it was far more significant for its establishment of the rights of the people of CARICOM and for eliminating misconceptions of the supremacy of national sovereignty over Community Law." Far more? What does it mean for gender justice that in the immediate afterlife of the case, the claim of a general victory can so swiftly sidestep some very specific injustices that happened to Ms Myrie because of who she was taken to be? The physical sexual violations and psychic trauma that Ms Myrie experienced are part of the story and no less significant. The fact that she had to relive all of this before the entire Caribbean, through whispered speculations about her real motives for travelling to Barbados, are part of the story and no less significant. Shanique Myrie has put a face to the gendered discrimination and sexual violations that so many women have historically endured at regional border crossings. That it was not an issue before the CCJ, and that it continues to be side-lined in the court of public opinion, should not mean it is any less significant or that it does not matter.

But it is also true that Caribbean women are not at equal risk of being made to strip, squat, bend over, finger-raped and humiliated at regional border points. We have seen little critical examination of the class and gender dimensions of this case. We might well ask whether there is an unspoken investment in gendered respectability in our rush to celebrate Shanique Myrie as a Caribbean Rosa Parks. As a not insignificant aside, consider the difference between the dominant idea of Rosa Parks we are familiar with, as the diminutive mother of the Civil Rights movement, and the Rosa Parks who was a highly active member of the NAACP and attended meetings of the Communist Party. And fewer of us have heard of Claudette Colvin, told to give up her seat on a bus nine months before Rosa Parks. We should pause to consider whether the fact that Colvin was an unmarried pregnant teenager has anything to do with her story not being widely told.

In relation to the Myrie case, then, we should not forget the online commentaries about whether she was really a sex worker, opinions that will not disappear just because a judgment has been tendered. There is an insightful blog by Annie Paul, asking why a Jamaican news story covering the case found it necessary to describe Ms Myrie as 'fair-skinned, beautiful and well-dressed.' Paul concluded that style was substance, and that establishing gendered and sexual respectability was everything: What have we required of Shanique Myrie, and how has this silenced her yet again? Meanwhile the Caribbean Sex Workers Coalition has been calling for the right to freedom of movement and migration with dignity. What are the consequences for their struggles of our preoccupations with respectability that turn on policing the female body, on drawing lines in the sand between deserving and undeserving women? What will the CCJ decision mean for their bodies at border points?

Staying with this question of respectability brings me to the second case. On Friday September 6th, a judgment was delivered on a motion that had been filed in Guyana's High Court in 2010, and which challenged a law under which seven persons were charged with dressing in female attire for an improper purpose

under Guyana's Summary Jurisdiction (Offences) Act. Four of the seven arrested persons and the Society for Sexual Orientation Discrimination challenged the law as violating several fundamental constitutional rights. In his judgment, the Chief Justice awarded damages on the basis of the violation of the litigants' constitutional rights to due process. However, while he emphasized that there is nothing to prohibit "a person wearing an 'attire' for the purpose of expressing or accentuating his or her personal sexual orientation in public," the learned Chief Justice upheld the law in its entirety, rejecting all arguments about its unconstitutionality. Thus, cross-dressing remains illegal if worn for an improper purpose. What is given with one hand is swiftly taken away with the other.

There is much that can be said about this case, including how the vague term 'improper purpose' leaves the police with extensive discretionary powers in a context of widespread homophobia and transphobia,. Today, however, I want to comment briefly on the origin of these laws, developed in the late nineteenth century, and protected in the post-independence Caribbean by saving law clauses. A clue as to their proper intention is supplied by some of the other offences that remain illegal today, like "beating or shaking a mat [in public] between seven in the morning and six in the afternoon"; or "flying any kite or playing at any game" in public. Historian Diana Paton reminds us that "the vagrancy laws in the Caribbean, including those in the Guyanese Summary Jurisdiction Act [where the cross-dressing charges come from], date from a period shortly after slavery when the colonial authorities were looking for new ways to control the population...and...were mostly derived from Victorian ideas of respectability and proper behaviour." Against this backdrop, the constitutional challenge to the cross-dressing law confronts us with the exclusionary legacies of our colonial past that haunt our lives and laws today, marking some as more deserving and equal than others.

At work here is the intricate relationship between law, discipline and order, a project of class respectability that is gendered, sexualized, racialized. This anxious business of policing boundaries. Of keeping bodies in their place. Of dividing us from each other. We know this all too well. We do it ourselves and we do it to

ourselves. We instruct our children: Tie the heifer but let the bull run free. The threatening admonition of a grown man to a gay teenager walking by, 'Hey you, yuh better learn to speak wid yuh man voice.' In the court judgment we see this logic at work in the efforts to defend binary notions of men and women, and of male attire and female attire, all in the face of seven transgendered applicants whose very presence in the courtroom offered an embodied rebuke to the violence and blinkered limits of this thinking. They reveal what Aaron Kamugisha refers to as the cruel coloniality of citizenship that persists in our contemporary Caribbean, the uneven landscape framing our desires to belong.

How to keep a focus on futures beyond coloniality, while navigating the ways it seeps into the spaces that we inhabit, the inescapable entanglement? This brings me to the final case, the Saramaka People v. Suriname. In his book *Rainforest Warriors*, anthropologist Richard Price describes how the Saramaka Maroons, fed up with massive concessions being given to mining and logging companies by the Government of Suriname, took their fight to protect the rainforest that they had inhabited for some 300 years to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and won in 2008, although the reference by some to this landmark judgment as securing "territorial rights...for all of the Maroons and indigenous people" was somewhat premature, given the decision on a case less than one year later in neighbouring Guyana. That judgment, which found for a gold miner and against an Amerindian community, concluded that if mining operations were really affecting the claimants, they would simply have moved to other areas.

In Suriname, Richard Price describes how the Saramaka produced maps for the court that offered a detailed inventory of the territory they had occupied for hundreds of years. At one level, we might read the decision in their favour narrowly, in ways that confirm the satisfaction of legal standards of evidence to satisfy a claim of ownership. And surely this is not to be treated lightly. But, and this is what I want to underline here, this is not the entire story. There is a much deeper lesson. Audre Lorde (who passed twenty years ago last year) beautifully lays out the stakes for us: "Am I altering your aura, your dreams, or am I merely moving you

to temporary and reactive action? And even though the latter is no mean task, it is one that must be seen within the context of a need for true alteration of the very foundation of our lives." Price describes the Saramakas sacred connection to the land thus: "From the varied and complex ritual guards hung in fruit trees to prevent theft to the disposition of protective and curative plans around houses, from the snake gods and forest spirits who share garden spaces with Saramaka men and women to the river and sea gods who share their village landing-places... the relationship of people and their territory is rich, ongoing, systematic... historically, spiritually, and materially." And in Guyana, an Amerindian woman from a community challenging mining claims complained that "Those who claim to represent us should know how indigenous peoples are connected to their lands. Instead they act like they are clueless." What we see in all this is the strategic deployment of the law, which in the case of the Saramaka involved a transnational network of 'experts' that included sophisticated GIS mapping devices; 21st century Anansi so to speak!

The vexed question is, do we change the law (or enter an institution), or does the law/institution work its violence on us? It seems like a Faustian bargain, having to make oneself speak a language that reproduces the relations of domination in the first place—I know my colleagues working on the reparations issue must be thinking of this as well, figuring out a mechanism that delivers justice without reproducing the original obscenity of commodification of lives. What really stays with me is how the Saramaka seem to have engaged legal systems while at the same time indexing a form of belonging over and beyond the law that anticipates a future beyond coloniality. The maps to which they refer operate on a completely different register from the ones that the state privileges, with its emphasis on bringing 'development' to these communities. Rather than attempt to establish land as a commodity to be possessed, mastered, used up and then discarded, these Maroon (and indigenous) maps reveal a dense web of sacred obligations and relations with the land and with others. They are about knowing not owning, about the properties of land and not land as property. The deeper lesson goes well beyond what any legal judgment could ever deliver; as Toni

Morrison memorably puts it, these ways of storying the land offer maps “without a mandate for conquest.”

I was a child growing up in Guyana when members of the Wai Wai community came to town to construct the Umana Yana in our capital city in 1972. If you google ‘Umana Yana’ you will ‘learn’ that it is a “conical thatched palm hut,” and that it was originally built in Georgetown as a VIP lounge and recreational space. In fact in Wai Wai villages it is a meeting place, and as I have only recently learned it is also “the house-where-people-live,” a concept that denotes the reproductive energies of both the cosmos/upper worlds and the uterus. I invoke it here respectfully, as a tentative and generative metaphor for feminist engagement, framing our coming together to contemplate the fundamental questions posed by these indigenous struggles, struggles that to be honest we are yet to fully embrace.

Returning to where I opened this talk, in which the moment of the creation of Gender and Development Studies as a legitimate object of academic engagement was the same moment of the consolidation of neoliberalist globalization, let me suggest that these indigenous struggles offer critical insights into what it means to grapple with contradiction. How might we learn from and with them? We might seek out connections with the determined efforts of Caribbean women in the 1980s who led the challenge to structural adjustment programmes and free trade zones, as Rhoda Reddock has documented. We might ask whether opposition to land exploitation resonates with other movements, like the aluminium smelter protests or Highway Re-Route right here in Trinidad and Tobago. We might relate our insistence on the importance of caring labour with the following description an Amerindian woman gives about why she is protesting a mining claim: “I want fish and farine and cassava and food I grow on my own land. It is what I am accustomed to. I want to take my children and show them this plant is for diarrhoea and that is for pain or that is for cuts. We want to work the lands.” In these indigenous struggles we are seeing a comprehensive critique of the inhumanity of our contemporary situation, of a

system that sacrifices resources and bodies and dreams to profit, but a struggle that also offers a way of knowing and forms of relation that might lead us to each other and to ourselves.

Today, we inhabit the contradictions of institutionalization, of staking out interdisciplinary integrity for Gender Studies while simultaneously facing the territorializing imperatives that come with disciplinary specialization. We live in a time of rising education costs and debates over the introduction of student fees. A time where globally lipservice is paid to critical thinking while increasingly the humanities has to do daily battle to justify its existence. Where we work miracles in a context of scarce resources but do not want to be celebrated as indefatigable miracle women—that simply leads to more taking for granted of our time and labour. Where the model is increasingly one of what Law Professor Margaret Thornton recently referred to as the technopreneur, a highly masculinised model of the high flying, independent and successful academic.

The inescapable entanglement. It is impossible, and naïve, to disengage. These institutions are also the site of our activism. But as anthropologist George Mentore asks, “How to continue the engagement and not lose the Human sense of Being?” Operating strategically, like Anansi. Recognising with Audre Lorde what risks are worth taking in our efforts to “alter the true foundation of our very lives.” And always remembering the struggles of others that got us here, the foundation stones of institutional edifices that seem at times as if they float on air. The legal cases I referenced this afternoon are just one part of the story; just as crucial are the people and movements that preceded them: the women traders, domestics, small farmers, family members who traverse the Caribbean; LGBT activists; indigenous mobilizations. We must put all of this back in.

We put this back in because we know that a policy, a memo, a law are not enough without our constant vigilance—we do not know what sanctions are possible if a country wilfully disobeys the CCJ ruling on Shanique Myrie; the cross-

dressings ruling underlined how difficult it is to take on entrenched homophobia and transphobia; in Suriname the ruling of the Inter-American court continues to be disregarded. Elsewhere, organisations like the National Union of Domestic Workers join forces internationally to secure ILO Convention 189 establishing labour standards for domestic work, only to have to continue to agitate for its ratification across the region; we face a rising tide of domestic violence and sexual offences in a region that has among the most advanced legislation on these matters in the world.

We put this back in to remind ourselves of what are we working for and with whom. Norman Girvan's remarkable example of policy recolonisation in Jamaica where the IMF required the government to provide daily reports "on 13 items, weekly reports on 6 items; monthly reports on 22 items, and quarterly reports on 10 items," makes a compelling case for the importance of genuine accountability to the people of the Caribbean. We put this back in because the price of forgetting is a narrow careerism that deepens the distortions of our political culture, where a female Minister of Education can say that women should dress properly if they do not want to give temptation to men. Where a female Minister of Human Services, addressing allegations that young women had been blackmailed into performing sexual acts with young men that were distributed on DVDs and the internet, can state that on the basis of still photographs she had seen, this all looked consensual. We put this back in because advancement of a few at the expense of the majority can never count as true liberation.

And finally, we put this back in because there is an African proverb that says that when someone dies, they only truly cease to exist when we stop talking about them. Storying the movements keeps the energies and the aspirations alive, informing the work of new feminist generations, from Code Red for Gender Justice out of Barbados to the diasporic journeys of Jahajee Sisters in New York, who take the courage of our indentured foremothers as their starting point for connection. In our deepest moments of frustration or just plain tiredness, it reminds us that it is

okay to pause, to allow ourselves to be rejuvenated by the knowledge that so many others are on the journey as well.

We put this back in
because
we
cannot
survive and be whole
without it.

On this 20th anniversary, I close with a poem that Mahadai Das has bequeathed to us. She died in 2003, tragically, at 48 (this is the tenth anniversary of her passing); poet Ian McDonald says that “her heart broke and her mind raged.” Ever so gently, in a wistful and hopeful tone, she offers us herself as the lesson, a portal through which we might glimpse a whole, integrated, nurturing and returning cosmos, where passion and the stubborn certainty of a flickering but protected light guide our journey. It is within our grasp.

If I should ever die
Return me to the fire
If I should live again
Return me to myself.
Heartfire
flame in hurricane-lamp
Outside, into this storm.

Congratulations, once again. And thank you for inviting me to share this week's celebrations with you all.



Attendees at the opening of the IGDS, 20th anniversary conference and public lecture, Learning Resource Centre, The UWI, St. Augustine Campus, November 2013.

Left to right, Back row: Professor Clement Sankat, Alissa Trotz, Jeanette Morris, Prof. Verene Shepherd, Peggy Antrobus, Prof. Rhoda Reddock, Prof. Mark Figuero. Front row: Dr. Grace Sirju Charran, Prof. Bridget Bereton, Dr. Piya Pangsapa, Prof. Jocelyn Massiah, Prof. Barbara Bailey, Prof. Elsa Leo-Rhynie, Prof. Violet Eudine Barriteau, Prof. Patricia Mohammed.