

African-Caribbean Women, Diaspora and Transnationality

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Depuis trois dernières décennies, les ouvrières caribéennes issues des îles anglophones, (Jamaïque, Trinidad, les Barbades en particulier), ont été prises dans la prolifération des mouvances entre les pays. Cet article examine les nationalités et les expériences de ces femmes et comment s'expriment et se négocient leurs identités raciales et sexuelles dans la diaspora, comme mères, travailleuses et citoyennes. L'auteure utilise le style narratif pour parler de la maison, de la diaspora et des nationalités en s'inspirant de ses propres expériences.

Memory One

I recall a photograph of my mother when she had newly arrived to Canada. She is wearing a long red coat with black stripes down the front. She is standing beside a tree in the dead of winter with her hands in her pockets. A huge Afro crowns her head. The juxtaposition between my mother's Afro representing freedom and her coat representing exile is reflective of her diasporic reality. "Home" or Trinidad was very much alive for my mother while living in a foreign country. It represented a location to connect with family and friends, a place to escape to in a way, and a possible destination in old age.

Transnational migration, movements, and formations are informed by the conditions of global capitalism. The constant yet unevenly distributed flow of capital and labour across borders, and between nations, is not solely an economic process but also affects social identities and cultural relations across gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Transna-

tional relations are racialized and gendered within the rubric of globalization (Ho 1999). Over the last

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three decades, working-class African Caribbean women from the Anglophone Caribbean (Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados in particular) have been caught up in the proliferation of transnational movements. The increased female out-migration from the Caribbean to Canada and the United States during the 1970s was not only necessitated by the search for better economic opportunities by these women but by the political economy needs of these post-industrialized countries for semi-skilled labour. By the mid-1980s, Caribbean economies were collapsing under World Bank/International Monetary Fund implemented structural policies that brought on increased social malaise, poverty, inflation, and unemployment. Going abroad or *foreign* be-

came even more pressing for working-class African-Caribbean women who sought economic opportunities elsewhere in lieu of sending back remittances to support their weakened households. Their efforts to migrate, work and re-settle were complicated by substandard wages and restrictive immigration policies in host countries. This paper explores transnationality and working-class African-Caribbean women's experiences as it relates to how they express and negotiate their racialized and gendered diasporic identities across borders as workers, mothers, and citizens. I will relate notions of *home*, *diaspora*, and *transnationality* to my lived experiences.

Home, Diaspora and Memory

The traditional meaning of the word diaspora refers to the dispersal of a group of people from their homeland. Throughout time, due to war and political and religious persecution, people have lived in exile or away from their homeland for long periods of time in hopes of some day returning to their country of origin. Many are familiar with the Jewish experience of dispersal, exile, and return. But the Caribbean is a region of diasporas comprised of many different groups of people who originated elsewhere. Under varying circumstances both forced and free,

virtually everybody in the Caribbean came from somewhere else—the African slaves from West Africa, the white settlers, planters and administrators from Europe, and the indentured workers who arrived after the

collapse of slavery. (Cohen 22)

The diversity and mix of cultures within the Caribbean makes it a unique historical and cultural location. As a result of slavery and colonization, people of African ancestry comprise a particular diasporic group. African-Caribbean people have influenced and contributed to the creation of Caribbean "Creole" cultural forms (e.g. language, music, dance, religion, etc.) in the region. Caribbean people are also "twice diasporized" (Hall 6) due to secondary migratory movements in search better economic opportunities to England in the post-World War II period and Canada and the United States in the 1960s and onward (Palmer). This has resulted in the creation of transnational Caribbean communities abroad.

While globalization has impacted on the lives of the world's people, their varied responses to macro-economic forces have inadvertently influenced the creation of new social forms. Although territorial and geographical boundaries remain intact between North/South and richer and poorer countries and along racial and ethnic lines, transnationality, as a social process, reflects the dialectical relationship between *home* (origin) and *diaspora* (away from or in exile) through the inter-connected flow of commodities, services and people (Thomas-Hope). The contemporary meaning of *diaspora* for de-colonized people consists of numerous movements and creating multiple meanings of *home* across borders that may not result in a permanent return back to one's place of origin (Brah). Going back *home* may not be possible or pleasurable for some due to political, economic, and social strife while others may be caught-up in the illegal immigrant flow, which makes going back home difficult. Therefore, roots of *home* are planted elsewhere. For some immigrants, their transnationality disrupts meta-narratives of nation, nationhood and citizenship. "Here" and "there" are contested for

those who maintain ties and connection to more than one place (real or imagined) at the same time. While this fluidity is expansive, it is complicated by negotiating feelings of belonging and not belonging to different locations resulting in an insider/outsider reality. Bridging the gap between a few cultural worlds is usually necessitated by the practicality of survival and also by processes of acculturation. Transcultural formations and expressions are an amalgamation

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of different cultural norms and traditions articulated through a diasporic lens. Diasporic identities are produced and reproduced through the collective memory of a group of people. The pliability of memory allows for *home* to either be muted or be imagined in favourable or nostalgic ways in fostering national pride. This is usually a coping strategy used by immigrants to deal with feelings of un-belonging while integrating into a new society, especially when they are not a part of the racial, ethnic or cultural majority.

Memory Two

Like many other immigrants, my parents migrated to Canada to provide a better life for me. I don't remember my parents leaving me behind in Trini-

dad at the age of three but I do remember being reunited with them at the age of five. It was 1974. It was cold. I remember getting a coat and a pair of rubber boots to wear and keep me warm. Throughout the years I had to adapt to my new life and environment. I remember accompanying my mother to her little jobs where she cleaned homes that seemed like mansions compared to our cramped one-bedroom apartment. My mother didn't work as a domestic for too long. She hated the hours, the low pay, and not being able to speak her mind when she was unfairly treated.

By the 1970s, immigrants of colour who had previously been denied entry into the country were admitted to fill gaps in certain employment sectors due to changes to Canadian immigration policy with implementation of the points system (Jakubowski). Caribbean immigrants, like other immigrants of colour from the "third world," came to Canada to work, settle and to be reunited with family members. The influx of first generation Caribbean immigrants to Canada during this time had a definitive gender component. How did working-class African-Caribbean women negotiate nation-state boundaries as workers and immigrants?

Many working-class African-Caribbean women entered the country as foreign domestics under temporary work permits to fill the labour demand in domestic services. From July 1975 to June 1976 "44.8 percent of all entrants to Canada's foreign domestic program were from the Caribbean, and only 0.3 percent were from all countries in Asia" (Bakan and Stasiulis 1995: 316). As migrant workers, these women had to fulfill a two-year contract with given employer, after which they had to return back home or find some way of being sponsored in order to remain in the country (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Calliste; Daenzer). Lacking labour, mobility, and citizenship rights they were a hyper-

exploitable group (Arat-Koc 1990; 1997). A particularly noteworthy restriction for *some women* was that in order to qualify for employment as foreign domestics they had to be without dependents. Encountering poverty and unemployment in their home countries, many African Caribbean women *with dependents* felt compelled to conceal their maternal status in order to work in Canada as domestics to support their families. Their circumvention of immigration policies not only had legal ramifications but emotional ones related to prolonged separation from children and family members. By the mid-1980s, however, there was a shift in the racial representation of foreign domestic workers from Caribbean women to the increased importation of Filipina domestics, who were perceived as being less troublesome (Jakubowski). Even those African-Caribbean women who were landed immigrants found themselves streamed into domestic work or other forms of paid reproductive work as nurses and healthcare aides (Calliste; Das Gupta). African-Caribbean female migrant workers and immigrants in the United States have also experienced labour segregation and exploitation in the domestic work sector (Colen; Romero). The racialization of black women's labour from a colonial past has contributed to them being over-represented in both private and public paid reproductive work (Nakano Glenn), where they engage in, as Dionne Brand calls it, dirty work (e.g. cleaning, washing, feeding, caregiving, etc.) for limited pay. Overworked and underpaid working-class African-Caribbeans struggled to make ends meet, especially single mothers. Working more than one job became commonplace for some. Factory work (e.g. the garment industry) and service sector jobs were other alternatives for those African-Caribbean women of lower skill and educational backgrounds (Anderson).

Working-class African-Caribbean women had high hopes in providing



Marie-Denise Douyon, "Tribulation," pastel and turpentine, 46" x 32", 1991
Photo: Paul Simon

a better future for themselves and their families but no one told them that the intersectionality of their race, gender, class, nationality, and immigrant status would position them as outsiders. Racial sexism prevailed, reinforcing discrimination in the workplace and wider society at large. My mother had many different jobs while she settled in Canada. I remember her working in a factory where Christmas paraphernalia was made. My mother would come home with red lint covering her clothes. She also complained about her clothes and hair getting soiled with red stuff. Her boss was cheap and demanding

and she worked for pittance with no benefits. Some of her friends were less vocal about being treated unfairly because they did not have their papers (landed status) and feared that immigration would be called on them. It is a shame to know that my friend's mother from Antigua has been working in the same garment factory in Toronto for about 25 years where she has no benefits and earns less than \$10 per hour. Sometime after my mother left her factory job, she began to work as clerk for a legal stationary company where she had a little more stability but had to deal with the racism of her co-workers. Canada

did not turn out to be my mother's promised land. The real hope for her was for me to get a good education so I would have better opportunities to succeed. Several of my mother's friends who were nursing assistants and healthcare aides always seemed overburdened and tired by constantly working the graveyard shift. One of my mother's friends in particular worked around the clock in both a hospital and a nursing home and had little time to spend with her children. At one time or another many of my female relatives who migrated to the United States worked as domestics or did in-home elderly care before going on to work elsewhere. While the pay and the work conditions were undesirable, it seemed better than nothing, especially for those who had to support their families and households back *home*.

Gendered Diasporic Identities

Caribbean people in Britain, the United States, and Canada have transplanted their cultures (e.g. music, language, food, festivals, etc.) and traditions abroad, mixing old with new in order to sustain their communities (Chamberlain 1998; Henry; Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton-Blanc). The vibrancy of Caribbean diasporic expressions in multiple locations shows the breadth of Caribbean transnationality. African-Caribbean women have played an important role in keeping Caribbean culture and communities alive abroad. Olivia Espin's discussion on migration, gender and sexuality is important in considering the challenges that women face cross-culturally in the migratory process in negotiating gender roles and relations within new cultural environments. Espin points out that depending on family composition (nuclear, extended, single or otherwise), ethnicity, culture (language religion) and socio-economic background, some women may experience more freedom and opportunity in a new society while others may encounter re-

strictions due to the reinforcement of traditional patriarchal norms, especially when the new cultural elements of the host country contradicts established familial and gender codes particularly for women. Within the migratory process, more pressure may be placed on women than men to preserve traditions of their original culture because of their reproductive role in nurturing and socializing children. But the notion that women are carriers of culture is a gendered con-

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struct, and not a pre-determined disposition, which nonetheless could be used to control female sexuality.

Although I came to Canada at a young age, my parents made sure that *home* (Trinidad) was kept alive for me. But my mother and father had a different gender script in imagining and privileging *home*. My mother kept *home* alive in functional ways while my father contributed the artistic and creative elements. He did so through music, playing steel pan, storytelling, jokes, and teaching me the names of tropical plants. Caribana¹ was also a big thing for him so as a young girl I attended the parade annually before I really understood its greater significance. My mother, on the other hand, carried on the matri-centered tradition of her family in managing the house-

hold and finances with a great deal of personal autonomy. Growing up in Toronto, I lived in between two worlds, one of my parents (really my mother) and the other of my friends. I had big Sunday dinners (callaloo, stew chicken or beef, macaroni pie, fried plantain and, of course, rice), weekly Saturday cleaning of the apartment that seemed to last the entire day, monthly purges with castor oil to clean out my system and I had to respect my elders and mind my own business, especially when I wanted to do what "Canadian" kids do. Throughout my childhood, I made periodic visits to Trinidad where I would spend the summer months under the protective gaze of my paternal grandmother where I ate mangoes, played marbles (or pitch) with other kids and learned to ride my first bike without training wheels. While my childhood memories of Trinidad grew hazy as I matured, my mother kept one foot planted in Canada and the other in Trinidad to ensure that cultural amnesia did not set-in or that the assimilation bug did not strike her like it did some of her friends.

Transnational Caribbean Families

By the 1980s, the weakened economies of Caribbean nations, caused by indebtedness and structural adjustment policies, offered limited hope in alleviating the poverty, unemployment and social malaise in the region, leaving many people in desperation. Hence, the function of transnational families becomes even more vital in this stage of advanced capitalism when the gap between richer and poorer countries widens. Christine Ho shows how Caribbean families in Los Angeles are active in the continuous maintenance of kin ties across borders "by means of constant communication and travel and the exchange of goods, services and personnel" (1993: 34). Transnational families and social networks are common to Caribbean diasporic com-

munities wherever they may be found. They provide “clues to the historical patterns or models of migration and second strategies of settlement and survival” (Chamberlain 1998: 257). Caribbean people in the region rely on the remittances sent from abroad to provide economic support to struggling households while governments welcome it as a source of foreign currency.

My mother understood the hardships endured by her relatives back home having experienced them herself. Coming from a lower-class family of ten children as well as belonging to a large extended family she felt a sense of responsibility in helping those she could. As an only child being raised in Canada, I did not understand fully the importance of my mother’s ongoing relationship with her kinfolk back home. My mother and I made occasional shopping trips to Honest Ed’s and Bi-way to purchase non-perishable items that would then be packed in a barrel along with clothes and shoes to be shipped to my aunts and cousins in Trinidad. My major task during the holiday season as a teenager entailed carefully writing out Christmas cards for relatives under the watchful eye of my mother who, while instructing me on what to write, calculated how much money (or change) to include in each envelope from her meager salary. Our transnational family functioned in a triangular pattern between Canada, the United States and Trinidad. Since money was tight for us, like many other African-Caribbean women, my mother ran a *sousou* or *partner* (a rotating credit and savings system) that allowed her to save money for big purchases or to help family members in Trinidad and the United States. Home was more real than symbolic for my mother. She and a few of her sisters were involved in sending funds back to Trinidad to purchase a piece of land upon which a larger family house would be built so that family and friends abroad would have a place to return to when they visited. Unfor-

tunately, their dream house never materialized.

Memory Three

My mother tells me that one of her sisters, my aunt, is visiting my grandmother in the United States. It’s the mid-1980s. My aunt says things are hard in Trinidad. You can’t even rub two pennies together. My aunt got a visa for six months so she decides to get a job, first as a domestic, then taking care of an elderly person. Her employer likes her because she is a good worker and she doesn’t have to pay her much. My aunt sends money back home to support her three children. They need food, clothes, and school supplies. She stays on without papers, hoping that her employer will sponsor her. She misses her children who she hasn’t seen in three years. Time passes and she finds a way to send for them—but how do they cope when they finally meet?

Transnational Motherhood

Female migrants from the “third world” find it difficult to go abroad to work because it often means leaving their children and families behind. Upon arrival in host countries, they are pushed into low-paying domestic work and service sector jobs with no benefits and limited rights (Cheng; Parrenas; Pedraza). In “I’m Here, But I’m There”: The Meaning of Latina Transnational Motherhood,” Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila discuss the impact of migration on Latina women who work in Los Angeles as nannies and housekeepers while their children remain behind in their countries of origin. Since the duties of domestic work, such as long-hours and live-requirements, are not compatible with everyday household and childcare responsibilities, Latina women have found alternative ways to work and take care of their children. The authors use the term *transnational motherhood* to refer to “how the meanings of motherhood are re-arranged to accommodate spa-

tial and temporal separations” (548). Alternative childcare arrangements are employed to deal with separation. This is important in showing how women as primary migrants have to reconcile their absence from their children through “circuits of affection, caring and financial support that transcend national borders” (550). Transnational mothering calls on female migrants to re-arrange mother-child relations in opposition to normative gender standards. The public/private dichotomy collapses as migrant mothers simultaneously engage in productive and re-productive activities by remitting money, goods, and services in order to care and provide for their children.

Working-class African-Caribbean women, particularly female migrant workers and undocumented immigrants, have had first-hand experiences as transnational mothers in supporting and providing for their children across borders:

Throughout time on both a regional and international level Caribbean women have utilized their extended family and kinship networks incorporating child-minding and child-shifting arrangements to buffer the effects of unemployment, poverty, racial oppression, and domestic disruption. Caribbean women, like other women in the African diaspora, view motherhood and mothering as a collective rather than a solitary or private act. (Crawford 108)

But the psychosocial impact of migration is not easy for women, especially for working mothers who have to leave their children behind. African-Caribbean women and their children have had to deal with the difficulty of being separated from each other for long periods of time. Caribbean writers and scholars are attempting to address the issue of family dislocation in their work as result of immigration restrictions and employment marginality experienced

by Caribbean in host countries, which have retarded the pace of reunification with their children.

My two cousins were raised by my paternal grandmother and their father (my uncle) while their mother worked in the United States. Because of my aunt-in-law's tenuous immigration status she remained separated from her daughters for about ten years. She grappled with her decision to do so as the years passed and made all attempts to stay connected to her children while she provided for them from abroad. There were the regular phone calls and barrels filled with goods and gifts for her daughters. My cousins also had the opportunity to visit their mother during summer vacations so they were not totally estranged from her. When my cousins finally re-located to the United States in their late teens to be live with their mother tensions rose due to their lack of familiarity with each other and un-resolved feelings. Luckily, conflict was mediated with help from family members who had stake in ensuring that the adjustment process went well for everyone. This might not be the case for other families.

Conclusion

African-Caribbean women's diasporic experiences are racialized and gendered within the processes of global capitalism. African-Caribbean women have had to negotiate their roles as workers, mothers, and citizens across borders. Despite encountering marginalization and discrimination in host countries, they found ways to keep their families afloat. Transnational Caribbean social networks and families are pivotal in the transference of resources and the reproduction of culture and human power. African-Caribbean women's roles in transnational communities are not only important in showing how they influence socio-economic relations and cultural production across borders but what could occur if they used their transnationality to forge new relationships with Carib-

bean women in the region and elsewhere towards feminist resistance and mobilization.

Charmaine Crawford is a doctoral candidate in Graduate Women's Studies at York University. Her dissertation title is "Negotiating Motherhood: Transnational Migration and African-Caribbean Women in Canada."

¹Caribana is a two-week long Caribbean cultural festival that takes place in Toronto during the last weeks of July. It highlights Caribbean music, dance and performances and hosts a large cultural street parade (with musicians and masqueraders) that attracts millions of people. Caribana is a diasporic representation of Caribbean cultural heritage in Canada. It began in 1967 and was inspired by Trinidad's annual pre-Lenten Carnival as a part of Caribbean people's contribution to Canada's centennial celebrations.

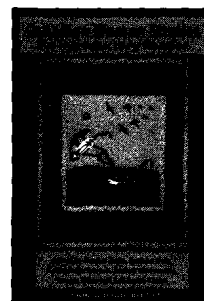
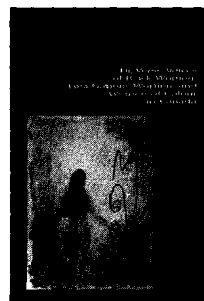
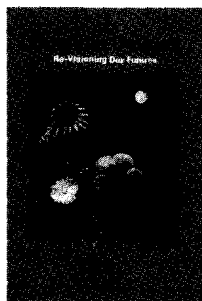
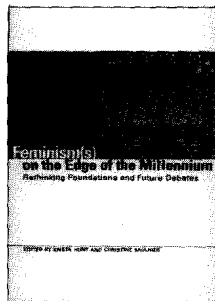
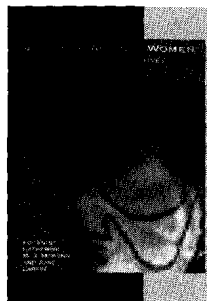
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