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Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean

Patricia Mohammed

Abstract

This attempt to develop an indigenous reading of feminism as both activism and discourse in the Caribbean is informed by my own preoccupation with the limits of contemporary postmodern feminist theorizing in terms of its accessibility, as well as application to understanding the specificity of a region. I, for instance, cannot speak for or in the manner of a white middle-class academic in Britain, or a black North American feminist, as much as we share similarities which go beyond the society, and which are fuelled by our commitment to gender equality. At the same time, our conversations are intersecting as a greater clarity of thought emerges in relation and perhaps in reaction to the other. Ideas of difference and the epistemological standpoint of 'Third World' women have been dealt with admirably by many feminist writers such as Chandra Mohanty, Avta Brah and Uma Narayan. In this article I draw on the ideas emerging in contemporary western feminist debates pertaining to sexual difference and equality and continue my search for a Caribbean feminist voice which defines feminism and feminist theory in the region, not as a linear narrative but one which has continually intersected with the politics of identity in the region.

Keywords

identity; sexual difference; colonization; migration; Caribbean feminism; *creole*

Locating the Caribbean

In the last decades of the twentieth century, for those who live out of this stepping stone of islands and adjacent territories between the north and south Americas, the Caribbean represents a deep blue and verdant green, sheltered from the icy cold wet winters of the north and far south, rain fed by the prevailing winds across the Atlantic and continually bronzed by the tropical sun. This contemporary image was in the making for over 500 years. It was not these aspects which initially encouraged the Dutch seafarers, the Spanish explorers, or the French and British planters and officials, to settle and colonize the landmasses. The region represented

virgin territory to be used, developed, exploited and governed by the trespassers. The indigenous Amerindian population had put up no gates or boundaries, no barbed wire fences, wore no armoured breastplates, to protect their underpopulated villages and settlements.

The narratives of misuses and abuses of colonization are tired old ones which will not be retired. The secrets and disguises of the past will be constantly rendered up for public scrutiny by each new generation of Caribbean peoples, descendants of the myriad group of migrants; enslaved, bonded, coerced or encouraged to work and settle in these lands. The historical past will be constantly interpreted by those who have adopted the region as their permanent or temporary home, untangled by those who physically live in the region, and debated by those who have migrated out of the region. Both consciously and unconsciously, the interrogation of the past with the present is the process of creating continuity and tradition. This continuity and tradition – of families, buildings, institutions, art, music, song, dance, cuisine, of political systems and political struggles, of language, and of cultural beliefs – all of these are markers of identity and difference. The different manifestations of these are the signature of the Caribbean on the world map – the way in which the circumstances of history, natural geography and resources of the region have evolved into something which is viewed by others and by ourselves as Caribbean, despite colonialism, and because of colonization.

To establish identity and difference is not simply to demarcate ownership or territorial rights, it is also an expression of the desire to belong (Moore, 1994: 2). Situating difference establishes the boundaries of belonging. In his Nobel acceptance speech of 1992 the poet Derek Walcott describes the region as ‘The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory’; he writes (1992):

Break a vase and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole . . . it is such a love that re-assembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars.

The project of defining identity is the most eloquent one now in the post-modern discourse. This preoccupation with ethnic identity did not begin in the academy but in the cultural assertions during colonialism, and during the post-colonial period, in the nationalist and independence struggles in the region. The scars which must be healed are not only those of physical brutality and privation. The deeper gashes are the deprivation of ethnic customs, and loss of ethnic pride and dignity. Undoubtedly, the scars of enslavement of African peoples are deepest. No other group, apart from the indigenous Amerindian population under colonization in the West Indies, suffered so much in terms of inhumanity, both physical as well as in the disruption and eradication of its cultural memory.

Ethnicity is a collective word which in its political appeal to the group, forgets sexual differences within a culture. Recognizing the different ways in which men and women within any cultural group experience enslavement, indentureship or migration is integral to understanding ethnic identity. The psychological scars of emasculation or defeminization caused by such uprooting are not skin deep and have residual effects on gender relations and gender struggles within a society far beyond the periods of disruption. Identity politics take the form not only of definitions against externalities, but are also about the internal and ongoing processes of constructing masculinity and femininity within the society. The dynamics of gender in each society or region operate not through grand revolutionary upheavals but through the ongoing negotiations between men and women both at the individual and collectively organized levels. Masculinity and femininity exist not simply in opposition but, I argue, equally in relation to each other (Mohammed, 1994: 32). In this process of reconstructing gender identities, the rhetoric – either nationalist or cultural – has generally been towards reinforcing an ‘ethnic’ ideal which predates the disruptions of colonization. Markers, such as dress or hairstyle, are good examples of how these appeals are made to women. In studying the colonized subject, the tendency has been to perceive the problem of reconfiguring gender identities as primarily that of the exploited group. It is, also, a problem which confronts the colonizers. Women whether born in Europe or creole born,¹ were themselves ill at ease with the situation. This is best illustrated by the author Jean Rhys whose novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and subsequent writings describe, with more pathos than historical writings can achieve, the insecurity and fears which also underlie the perceived ‘privileged’ spaces. The construction of masculinity and femininity went on busily under colonization as it continues at present.² Within each society, the residual effects of eurocentricism and elitism of the white planter class on the dynamics of race and gender in each society still inform the ongoing construction of masculinities and femininities. Feminism within Caribbean society has therefore been involved in an unrelenting dialogue about what constitutes Caribbean manhood and masculinity and womanhood and femininity, as it has also been affected by the increasing consciousness of and struggles for gender equality which inform the global discourse.

In this paper I select three aspects of difference which, in my view, has led to the specific ways in which feminism in the Caribbean is both articulated in daily struggles and activism as well as debated within the academic discourse. The *first* ‘moment’³ of difference is situated around the question of political struggles in the region and the stances taken by women. Some of these appear to be antithetical to contemporary feminist goals *per se*. My overall argument is that feminism as an expression of sexual equality must

itself be historically located, despite the global discourse which feeds its growth. The *second* moment contemplates the linguistic meanings of gender inside the region. I suggest here that the presentation and re-presentation of masculinity and femininity have internalized meanings within a culture, differentiated further still by class or ethnic groupings, but that this is key to the reproduction of gender identities within a society or region. The *third* moment, as it were, is closely linked to the idea of linguistic difference, but examines this in relation to the contemporary western feminist interrogation of 'sexual difference'. Here I am on more sandy ground as I am attempting to place these debates in the language of the English-speaking Caribbean. It seems to me that these issues of sexual difference versus equality also preoccupy our societies, but are not generally approached with the same theoretical stances. The concept of difference as it has been raised and deconstructed in feminist circles has generally focused on sexual difference between man and woman, and differences between women themselves; 'the feminist analysis of gender has undone one version of a presumably basic difference, thought to be rooted in nature, and come up with another, albeit more debatably basic than the previous one' (di Stefano, 1990: 64). If twentieth-century second wave feminism has problematized gender (Flax, 1990: 44), then the continuing goals of feminism, in my view, depend on the further deconstruction of 'difference' beyond the limits to which it has been already applied. I use the term to explore its overtones for understanding gender in the Caribbean.

In each of these sections I use illustrative examples to explain my points, but at the same time must outline here both my biases and assumptions. First, I am more familiar with the history, culture and struggles of the English-speaking Caribbean and therefore my theorization may have more relevance to these territories. Second, I am interested in feminism and the feminist movement as an historically progressive movement engaged in shifting human consciousness towards a greater acceptance of equality of the sexes, as well as a celebration of difference, both sexual and otherwise: not just lip service to equality and celebration of difference, but that which is realized in policies, programmes and in individual human relationships. The feminist movement has largely emphasized women's subordination and the ongoing need for a consciousness of gender equality to be built into the process of constructing gender identity. But female gender identities are not constructed in isolation from other components of identity such as race, class, nation and from masculinity. How identities are being affirmed or even constructed are based on real struggles which people and groups are engaged in and which they communicate to each other in coded messages within a culture, much the same way that lovers communicate with words, signals and body language, the meanings of which are not

immediately apparent to the onlooker. This preoccupation with different components of identity and my particular interpretation of feminism, inform both my approach as well as the areas I select for interrogation.

Caribbean feminism and the politics of identity

Why is there this insistent desire to re-assemble the fragments of ethnic and gender identities and to belong to a space? Why has Caribbean society engaged in a continuous process of defining identity? In a contemporary sense, the Caribbean appears more as a political space rather than a geographical entity. 'When did the name Caribbean move from the sea to the imprecise geography of some or all the land masses surrounding it?' (Gaztambide-Geigel, 1996: 1). One Puerto Rican historian traces the legend of the word *Caribe* as rebellious and/or enslaved native, a title assigned by the Spanish. The region was named the West Indies by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. There is a confusion of the name of the region in a Dutch map of West America dating back to 1594. It was the English-speaking Europeans who named the islands the *Caribby* or *Caribbee* Islands 'thus transferring to the sea waters the name once given to the masters of the islands' and the French who underscored the direct heritage when they spoke of *Mer des Caraïbes* or Sea of the Caribs. Gaztambide-Geigel, writes:

Ironically when the Caribs, by then mixed with the Africans, had been reduced to 'reservations' in Martinique and Dominica, or had been exiled by the British to the Mosquito Coast and Honduras, they became immortalized when the sea they had mastered was baptized with their name.

(Gaztambide-Geigel, 1996: 6-7)

Like a child, unsexed, named after the parents it has lost, the region and its peoples continue to examine the past. Edward Braithwaite also interprets the region similarly when he writes 'But we are really involved with two mothers (more as we grow younger)' (Braithwaite, 1985: 6). This process of becoming Caribbean continued past the abolition of slavery into the twentieth century with the addition of different ethnic groups. Each language group continues its association with its colonizer even while it constructs new destinies from within. The nationalist or independence struggles have differed for each society. In August 1791, two years after the French Revolution, the African slaves of the French West Indian colony of San Domingo revolted, a struggle which lasted for twelve years and led, in 1803, to the formation of the negro state of Haiti (James, 1963). Over 200 years later, in 1998, the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe are still *departements* of France. The once Spanish colony of Puerto Rico exchanged hands and is now administratively linked to the United States

of America but Spanish remains its mother tongue. The Spanish-speaking island of Cuba has forged its distinctive struggle for socialism, befriended and heralded in part by the region for its decisive political stance against the imperialism of the United States. By the twentieth century the English-speaking colonies, with the exception of the islands of Montserrat, Bermuda and the British Virgin Islands, are all independent states.

The region is imagined differently by the different groups who have settled into this space. The demographic distribution of races and ethnic groups brought together from east and west varies by territory and has led to different political tensions within each society founded on race or class/colour. In this demographic balance African descended peoples are the dominant group in most of the territories. This demographic dominance has largely posited the region as an African diaspora. Yet the writings of the second half of the twentieth century tell of other dispersions of peoples who feel the need to equally define their belonging within the region. Mary Noel Menezes records that 1985 marked the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Portuguese in Guyana; *The Still Cry*, by Kumar Mahabir, and *Survivors of Another Crossing*, by Marianne Ramesar, record the histories of the Indians who, in 1995, celebrated 150 years in the island of Trinidad, as they did also in Jamaica. The story of Chinese migration to Trinidad was examined by Trevor Millett in Trinidad, and Sylvia Moodie-Kublalsingh adds the oral history of panyols or espanoles, Trinidadians of mixed Spanish, Amerindian and African descent, to a burgeoning list of fiction and non-fiction writers. All of these are expressions of the re-ordering of experience to continuously redefine identity. In the same breath, these are not primarily expressions of difference, but of different members of the same family. The Caribbean is not just one lost child, but the children of many parents, who have made similar but different passages across the ocean – a sentiment best expressed by the Mighty Stalin, a Trinidadian calypsonian in the song ‘The Caribbean Man’: ‘we take the same trip in the same ship’.

History and experience moves on incessantly. In the twentieth-century development of capitalism, the Caribbean is no longer the site of plantations but the space from which labour can be reappropriated. The *Mer des Caraïbes* is not, nor was it ever, a sea. It is a wide open-mouthed river with currents which run back and forth across the Atlantic, to Africa and Europe, far east to India and China, and now especially northwards to the United States and Canada. The currents which continue this flow, the legacies of colonization and the influences of present imperialism, make the Caribbean equally open to global discourses. In this definition of regional, national and ethnic identities, the Caribbean finds itself poised between sovereignty and openness – a small eddy in a large stream, but an

eddy all the same. The Caribbean is the community, the society is the village, and the ethnic group represents the family at home and abroad with whom we establish a past, find solace in the present and seek assurance for a future.

Political struggles for identity which have taken place in the Caribbean must themselves be historicized and culturally investigated if they are to have meaning. In 1791, two years after the French Revolution in Europe, and one year before Mary Wollestonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and situated the base from which the liberal feminist struggle for women's equality began, the Caribbean was in the midst of the Haitian Revolution, described by C.L.R. James as the only successful slave revolt in history (James, 1963: ix). The class of women who would and could question the ideology of male dominance with the pen was limited. Lucille Mathurin Mair (1974), commenting on the period 1655 to 1770 in Jamaican history, writes that

The dominant creole values of a society 'whose business was business' continued, during the classic slavery period of 1770 to 1834, to determine the condition and interrelationships of women. Racism and colonialism combined with sexism to shape their life patterns. Women's acceptance of prevailing norms confirms the orthodoxy of women as the silent, second sex, serving as a conservative if not reactionary social element.

At the same time, we should not conclude that women, black, white or brown, were indifferent or lacking in a consciousness of gender, however defined at that time in the Caribbean. Mathurin Mair concluded from her analysis of this period that 'Counter-evidence also suggests women's capacity for criticism, modification, rejection even, of these norms, in ways often peculiarly available to them, as women' (Mathurin, 1974: 1).

The peculiarity of women's situation is that they are at the same time inside and outside of politics. Mathurin Mair points to situation of white women in Jamaica during slavery. English law and custom dictated the status of the white woman in Jamaica. White women had no voice in the Parliament, could make no laws and the rule of primogeniture ensured that the eldest son inherited the estate of his father. A good marriage saved them from 'unnatural' spinsterhood, possibly from destitution; an unmarried daughter was a burden and shame to the family:

Edward Long breathed a sigh of relief at his daughter's 'honourable alliance' to Mr. Howard in 1801 for he had 'dreaded leaving her at large in the world, either to be subject to the multitude of inconveniences which generally attend the situation of the single woman, or else to experience the mortifications of a state of dependence on someone of their relations'.

(Mathurin, 1974: 224)

None the less, men of substance took good care of their daughters and white women furthermore had the advantage of being part of the élite by virtue of their whiteness. The shortage of white females did not necessarily give a white woman advantage over black and brown women as concubinage with the two latter groups, was deeply entrenched in the creole way of life. Marriage itself also did not grant white women further independence since it placed them in 'coverture' restricting their capacity to act as free and rational beings. Yet, the white woman in Jamaica was in many ways the 'classic creole consumer of prestige' ensuring that the status symbols of the ruling class maintained its distance from the middle and lower classes (Mathurin, 1974: 248).

After slavery, in Trinidad and Guyana, the system of Indian indentured labour introduced another ethnic group into these societies, between 1845 and 1917. The majority of Indian women and men were wage labourers, some later becoming part of the land owning peasantry, the minority were professionals or owned businesses of their own. The status of most Indian women was that of household or field labourer. Few Indian women had the luxury to be educated and to be involved in a debate on questions of female liberation and equality. At the same time such questions were already being raised by progressive Indian women in India, women such as Dr Anandibai Joshi (1865–1887) and Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) (Kosambi, 1994). This tradition of an anti-colonial female militancy in India was conveyed to Trinidad through the medium of the newspapers in a section entitled 'Indian News and Views' regularly featured in the Trinidad *Guardian* on Thursday and Sunday and produced by Indian journalist Seepersad Naipaul. One feature entitled 'Indian Women Hold Parley' drew attention to the All-India Women's Conference held in 1936 whose goals were to 'create a wider scope for the powers and responsibilities for Indian women, and to emphasize the value of women's work in every well ordered State' (*Sunday Guardian*, 5 July, 1936). Visitors to Trinidad, among them one Beatrice Grieg, drew local attention to the undeniably secondary status allocated to Indian womanhood in India and in Trinidad.⁴ Both in India and in the West Indies, Indian women were inside and outside the political struggle. On the one hand, the allegiances to ethnicity were encouraged through the retention of a Brahminic ideal. Indian women were expected to mirror themselves after the image of Sita, the virtuous, long-suffering and faithful bride of Rama,⁵ the latter epitomizing the male patriarch in control of his household – in order to counteract the 'westernizing' influences of the colonizer. Within the ethnic group, women as a group suffered as a result of this expectation of their roles and behaviour as women. It was unrealistic for women, who were themselves wage earners and homemakers, to confront their men and

assert their autonomy and independence on occasion. Indian women in Trinidad were caught in the dilemma of also desiring the re-establishment of 'Indian' ethnicity as it was recalled from India and the reconstitution of community within Trinidad, therefore colluding at one level with the reconstruction of an Indian femininity and masculinity, and with renegotiating new ideas of Indian womanhood in Trinidad. With migration had come many opportunities to change some of the more gender oppressive features of caste and religion. New-found freedoms based on the demographic shortage of Indian women in the colony, as well as a greater capacity for wage earning on estates, allowed them to question and challenge the patriarchal expectations of Indian femininity.⁶

The questions which would be raised for women by the second wave of feminism became more complex, adding to the issues of class and religion/ethnicity, those of political nationhood, race, and sisterhood among women. What political alliances should they forge? What interests would compel them to act on behalf of other women, themselves, their families, or their ethnic groups? It is important to view the emergence of the women's movement as parallel to, and intersecting with, other struggles which are specific to each group and society. Another example serves to explain the multi-layered aspect of struggle.

In the Pan-African movement which had its origins in the Caribbean, there was no specific feminist rhetoric in a contemporary sense of the word. Marcus Garvey formed the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914, shortly after he returned from England. The first member of the association was Amy Ashwood, a young woman of 17 who would in due course become his wife. Of the original list of members, it was revealed that over half of them were women. From the earliest phases, there were allocations for women as secretaries in each division and presidents of various divisions. The social welfare tradition of the period found these women and those of the UNIA involved in activities such as concerts, fundraising for the poor, visiting hospitals, setting up an industrial school, trying to run a labour bureau and finding jobs for unemployed persons. At weekly meetings of the UNIA, in what was then largely a debating society, topics pertaining to women such as 'Is the intellect of woman as highly developed as that of man?' were also discussed. It is recorded that Garvey himself participated in this debate and argued in the affirmative. Another debate entitled 'Women or men: Whose influence is more felt in the world?' shows a concern for issues of women's equality without the rhetoric of contemporary feminism.

Subsequently, when the UNIA moved to New York, women continued to play decisive and leading roles in the organization, although here more

black American women seemed to have been involved. What is clear, however, is that both in its name as well as focus, the issue was that of strengthening black nationalism. Garvey preached a doctrine of race first, self-reliance and nationhood, and linked the woman question to the race question in an intimate way. 'Race first meant that black folks would have to put their racial self-interest first' writes Martin (1988: 70).

Garvey told black people, among other things, to take down the white 'pin ups' from their walls. He was opposed to the gross advertisements for skin lighteners . . . he encouraged through his organization a factory that made black dolls so that young black children would not have to deal with the question of beauty being seen through the eyes of white folk all the time.

In contrast to Garvey's progressiveness on the equal participation of women, Claudia Jones, a famous black woman of the Communist Party of the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, lamented the position of black women in the party. If women supported Garvey as a leader, then it was also because Garvey supported women. Tony Martin comments that the dignity of women was a crucial issue for Garvey and the UNIA (Martin, 1988: 68). Honor Ford-Smith suggests that there is a close connection between the anti-colonial and feminist movement in many societies who have similarly experienced colonization and that 'the Jamaican feminist movement of the 1930s and 1940s was nurtured within the Garvey movement'. Ford-Smith identifies the contradiction of this 'feminist' stance at the time. 'Strangely enough, the ideal image of womanhood upheld within the movement differed very little from the ideal image upheld by dominant colonial ideology in terms of the way it perceived women's position within the family, women's labour and sexuality' (Ford-Smith, 1988).

Parallel with the emergence of the UNIA in Jamaica and the United States was the preamble to the anti-colonial struggles which fed the later nationalist struggles in Trinidad. Jim Headley, who had worked for years in the Trade Union Movement in the United States, returned in 1934 to Trinidad to witness the eruption of hunger marches. Together with Dudley Mahon, of the Federated Workers Trade Union, and Elma Francois,⁷ a former member of the Trinidad Labour Party, Headley founded the National Unemployment Movement. Within weeks of holding public meetings, pamphleteering and recruiting unemployed to the organization, the NUM had on its list 1,200 members and became a political pressure group in the society. The NUM suffered a quick death as Headley himself, as one of the hungry unemployed who was additionally hassled by authorities, felt forced to leave the country. The other members of the group felt that the focus on unemployment was too limited as a basis for wider political mobilization and, later the same year, the Negro Welfare Association,

founded by Elma Francois, Jim Barrat, Christina King, Payne and Rupert Gittens, came into being. The militancy of this period has been matched since then by other equally powerful messages such as the 'Black Power' riots of the 1970s in which women also fought as hill guerrillas alongside men. In the intervening period in Trinidad the co-optation of working-class and middle-class black women, by the nationalist demagogue who brought Trinidad to Independence, has come under close scrutiny in a rereading of the past with the still unfocused lens of the present.⁸

If women did not willingly support the national political struggles, sometimes any autonomous movement was defeated by dictatorship regimes. This was the case of the Dominican Republic under the Trujillo regime which lasted for more than thirty years. The regime adopted a patronizing patriarchal attitude, ostensibly supporting women's difference and at the same time quelling any revolutionary tendencies among women. There were, for instance, pensions for prolific mothers and 'demagogic concessions to "women's issues" such as women's suffrage and the enactment of a protective labour code'. Combined with the general repression experienced by the entire society, this was no climate for the development of any major women's movement before 1961. Despite this repression, three women, Minerva, Patria and Maria Teresa Mirabal, have emerged as icons for the contemporary women's movement in this society. The dictatorship had attempted to silence them through rape, and finally did silence them by assassination in 1960. Their deaths, however, accelerated the fall of Trujillo and his regime, although the succeeding regimes continued the manipulation of women and femininity for their own ends (Pineda, 1984: 132).

Despite their allegiances to nationalist and independence struggles, an unarticulated consciousness of gender equality must have run through the veins of each woman – black, white, Indian, Portuguese and Chinese, coloured, Spanish, French, Haitian, Barbadian – the same way the idea of racial equality had occurred to men and women long before the actual struggles for equality erupted in collectivities. To speak of a feminist movement in the Caribbean which predates the contemporary second wave movement is to bring alive on paper the individuals who would not be silent, those who spoke or wrote on behalf of others who felt similarly,⁹ much as we do today. To speak of a feminist movement in the Caribbean is to identify the contradictions which women faced in the post-colonial struggles and the contradictions of the men who welcomed their comradeship. There were different battles to be fought on Caribbean soil when the suffragette movement in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century began its pathbreaking and victorious fight which eventually benefited all women. By the middle of the twentieth century, when masses of

post-war unemployed and professional women in the United States felt the anger of rejection, women in the Caribbean were each differently placed in their own societies. That first wave feminism in the region took on many strands of a liberal feminist discourse, indicated that women's rights were still being fought for in the context of the equal rights tradition which defined the anti-colonial and race struggles. That second wave feminism assumed other dimensions of thought – some radical, some marxist, some liberal – is consistent with the expansion of identity politics which began to perceive individuals as belonging to different classes and different races. That feminism in general and the feminist movement in the Caribbean appears to be eclectic is that it has responded at the same time to the issues of class, race/ethnicity, nationhood and to gender identity. Only the openness of the mid-twentieth century onwards has created both the global consciousness as well as the rapid spread of the ideas of gender equality, which were always part of these struggles.

Creole – the expression of Caribbean difference

The struggles for political identity are generally overt statements of difference. Not all aspects of identity politics are so explicit or given to manifest expressions. Within any culture the language and meanings shared by those who speak the same language, also provide another space in which identity is being shaped. Language itself is a crucial marker of identity, as it is also an indicator of continuity and tradition. In Trinidad, for instance, the French words *jour ouvert* (day break, or opening day) describe the traditional opening of the two day pre-lenten carnival celebrations. Early Monday morning, before the sun has risen, the people who have been partying the night before spill out onto the streets and dance/walk to the slow steady rhythm of the steelbands around the towns. The words *jour ouvert* to a Trinidadian describe a mood, a feeling, a moment, a desire to be in that space, which, unless it has been experienced by someone for many years, could have no such meaning. The words themselves tell a large part of the history of this society, the influence of the French on language/culture. In the same vein the term *creole* has become a metaphor for the Caribbean region, its people, language and culture. The genealogy of the word is interesting and the term itself has been 'creolized' in its Caribbean applications for it is by no means only applicable to, or uniquely used, in the context of the Caribbean.¹⁰

There is a continuing adaptation of the term, its use has varied over time in the Caribbean and has meant different things to different groups, sometimes simultaneously in the same society. Lady Nugent, wife of the English Governor of Jamaica from 1801 to 1805, described the white women born

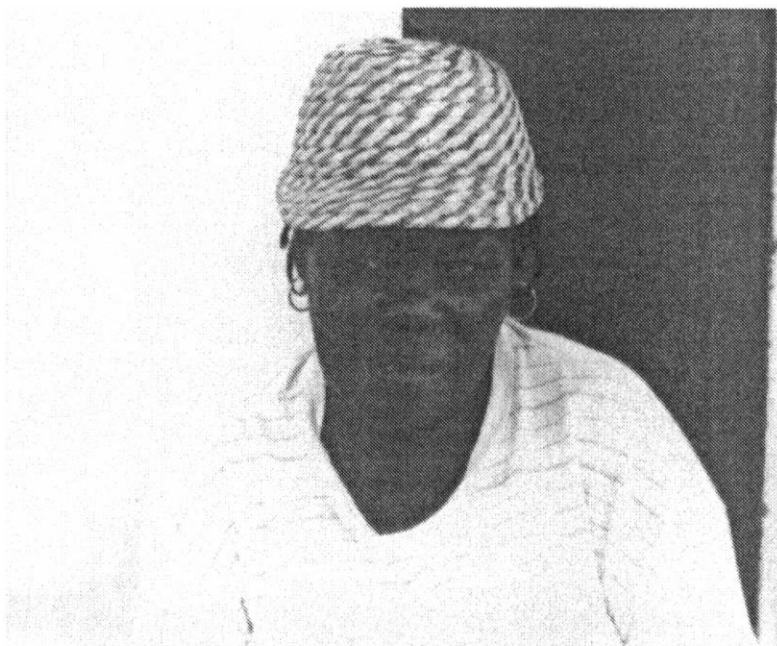


Figure 1 All faces of the Caribbean: Market seller in Dominica.



Figure 2 All faces of the Caribbean: Mayan, Garifuna and Creole women of Belize.

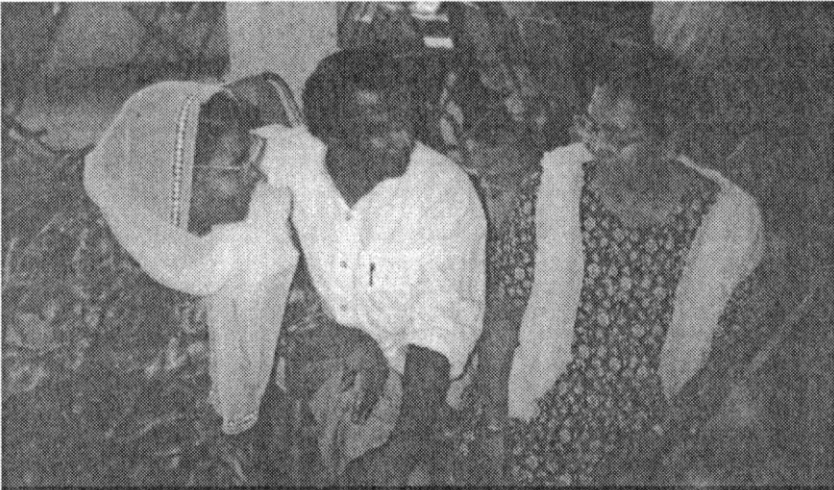


Figure 3 All faces of the Caribbean: Indians in Trinidad



Figure 4 All faces of the Caribbean: Old men siesta in Baranquilla, Caribbean coast of Columbia.

in the island as creole to distinguish them from the white women who came from 'foreign', applying the word not only to describe their birth, but also to differentiate their behaviour, habits and customs which were different as a result of being born and raised in the island (Nugent, 1966). Locally evolved habits, customs, cuisine and popular culture increasingly began to be defined as *creole*. In essence *creole* customs and habits were viewed as departures from a norm established by the European colonizer and perceived as deficient in both form and content. None the less, the term clearly had resonance for the peoples in the different territories of the Caribbean.

In Trinidad, for example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was used to refer to the descendants of the French planter class born in the society, as well as to the local African population.¹¹

Where language was key in the instrumentation of empire in the Caribbean, language has also been crucial in the definition of sovereignty. This battle was very early on appreciated by J.J. Thomas in his response to Anthony Froude's *The English in the West Indies: The Bow of Ulysses* published in 1887. Froude, a learned British scholar, travelled to the West Indies and was warmly welcomed by the local population. His book, officially commissioned by the British government, was a brutal and ignominious attack on the West Indians. Froude had been called upon by the West Indian colonists to block the efforts of the West Indian blacks, the first of the non-white colonial peoples who had become English speakers themselves, from functioning in their society according to the principles of parliamentary government. He argued that the black population was seeking a self-government which they did not have the capacity to exercise. J.J. Thomas, a largely self-taught scholar responded to his defamation with *Fraudacity: West Indian Fables Explained* published in 1889, displaying in his turn equal erudition and command of a language which was not his first tongue. J.J. Thomas was a young black educated man of Trinidad. In one of his jobs as a village schoolmaster in rural Trinidad he developed a facility for languages in order to communicate with students who spoke a variety of different tongues. Without any formal training in languages, Thomas mastered French, began to learn Spanish and understood the significance of the living dialect which he could observe in its evolution. He recorded the Creole grammar of the French language, the dominant stream which emerged from the babel of different tongues at the time in Trinidad in a book entitled *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar*. Published in 1869, this book was said to have been better appreciated by philologists in England and Europe than at home at the time, unfortunately another aspect of creole culture.

Both of Thomas's contributions had immediate, and still has far-reaching, implications for the continued evolution of creole society.¹² More importantly, it appears to me that, in his systematic study of *creole*, Thomas signalled not just the internal integrity of the grammar, but also the idea of language expressing the meanings shared within a culture. This emergence of a shared language revealed another aspect of the society's evolution – that people of different tongues had begun to communicate in a common language of their own, a language which excluded others, not consciously or deliberately, but because the meanings of words and ideas were also derived from the lived experience of the territory. Though culled from the mixtures of languages which each of the different groups brought,

the creole dialect in each region is predominantly influenced by the language of its chief colonizer. Within each society as well, the official language of the state and the *élite* continues to be the language of the main colonizing agent. In this relationship between two entities umbilically tied, we find the other dimension of creole society, the capacity to move back and forth between a language with its internal shared meanings, and the 'mother' tongue from which it was created. This skill for *double entendre* is nicely illustrated in J.J. Thomas's response to Froude in *Froudacity: West Indian Fables Explained*. He had the 'audacity' to confront the master 'using the master's tools'.¹³ In Trinidad, the importance assigned to command of the language is evident in the early development of the calypso where the singer demolished his opponent with language by using either 'big words' or *double entendre* which could be variously interpreted by the listeners.

The derivation from other tongues as well as the ongoing communication with its local audience created of *creole* not a mimetic culture,¹⁴ but a constantly evolving syncretization and hybridity. This is best explained through music¹⁵ and dance. The Cuban *rumba* evolved partly through interaction of slaves of different African regions, with a European influence obvious in the use of the Spanish language. Where the *santeria* of Cuba is largely a transplanted Yoruba entity, the *rumba* is a distinctly creole or Cuban creation. The evolution and eventual acceptance of creole musics are closely interconnected with the internal and external political struggles for nationalism and *élite* recognition of Afro-Caribbean heritage (Manuel, 1995: 15).

The way in which all these aspects of national identity struggles, economic deprivation or empowerment, popular culture and desire come together is in the *creole expression* of the body in Caribbean society, the language of intimacy. The language of intimacy is not only that of sexual desire, it is the expression of familiarity, tenderness, of mutual understanding or their bedfellows – antagonism,¹⁶ conflict and antipathy. All of these are inscribed in the language of the body, of masculinity and femininity, of man and woman, of gender and gender relations. There are subtle and indefinable ways in which a common language of the body and gender relations are shared within a culture, possibly even crossing race and class divides. These messages can be sought only in and through language as it is spoken and understood by people themselves. This element also explains the difficulty we have of understanding gender codes we encounter in a new society simply because we cannot immediately grasp the messages which are implicitly conveyed with and without words.¹⁷

What are such messages in the Caribbean?¹⁸ A first message might be the ideas of womanhood or manhood. When does a child move from being

a girl into an 'ooman' or from boyhood into 'you tink you is *man*'. There are numerous indicators of manhood as the research from Brown and Chevannes illustrate from an ethnographic project on gender socialization which spanned the societies of Dominica, Guyana and Barbados (Brown and Chevannes, 1995). Starting with the inscribed religious doctrine

From yu bawn yu is a man . . . De Bible did say, 'Let's make man', and outa man dere cometh ooman, . . . At all time yu mus' know seh yu is a man an' like yu is supreme. It go right back to religion y'know.

To biological criteria:

From me bawn wid 'ood [hood or penis], me know seh me is a man.

To self-determined behaviour and roles:

Him is man when him decide fe tek up responsibility. Like you start a relationship wid a girl. Suppose she get pregnant an she have a baby wid yu, yu start tek up dat responsibility. . . . Yu can be a man from yu is a likkle bwoy. An yu can be a big ol' bwoy.

When me really realized dat me turn a man was when me staat to work and hangle [handle] me own money, y'know. Buy my own clothes an t'ings like dat, me staat go out an' come in late, like look girlfrien' an t'ings like dat. Mi fadder used to tell me seh, me t'ink yu a man, yu come een dem hours ya a night.

Most importantly, male sexuality is a central definition of maleness, in relation to femininity,

A wil' [wild] man always get a enormous amount a respec' . . . a wil' man normally have money. An yu know that respect is based on money. If yu don' have money . . . yu get no ratings from nobody

but perhaps more stridently in opposition to male homosexuality, the latter widely perceived as pure 'wutlessness' or learned behaviour on the part of homosexual men or women.

Me love ooman bad, bad, bad, bad. Me hate gay wid a passion . . . how me seet it is like de type a gay wha me hate is, him is man like me, or him bawn wid balls, but because of certain situations like all economics, like all money, an him waan look good an, him go tu'n gay . . .

(Brown and Chevannes, 1995: 116–18)

The girl must be beaten into a young lady, to be a young 'ooman' is unacceptable. Both the fiction of the region and other forms of popular culture are replete with these messages:

All the same right is right and there is only one right way to bring up a [girl] child and that is by bus' ass pardon my french Miss Mary but hard things call

for hard words. That child should be getting blows from the day she born. The she wouldn't be so force-ripe now. . . . Little children have no right to have so many things in their brain. Guess what she ask me the other day nuh? – if me know how worms reproduce. . . . As Jesus is me judge. Me big woman she come and ask that.

(Senior, 1986: 69)

The allusion to 'force-ripe' – generally applied to prematurely ripened fruit – is a powerful metaphor for the construction of femininity. It situates the young girl in opposition to the 'big woman' who is mature and has the 'knowing' which the young girl should not possess before her time. The attainment of one's femininity is a process of grooming before attainment of sexual knowledge of the other sex.

While these processes of constructing masculinity and femininity take place in all societies, how they do so are both historically and culturally shaped and continue to be so, despite external influences. Like most culture, they are also passed on from one period to the next, and the terms and conditions are changed by the struggles between masculinity and femininity to define boundaries. For example the ideal of the 'browning' – the mixed light skinned woman – in Caribbean society is currently undergoing change, but these notions are the direct legacy of a colonial history of opposition between white and black sexualities. How does each culture agree on acceptable norms and practices of gender, for example, that in Trinidad 'a deputy is essential' or in Jamaica 'a man is entitled to his matie on the side'. The 'deputy' and 'matie' are the idiomatic references to the 'other woman', the 'bit on the side'. Is this a mutual agreement between men and women in society? Who determines the boundaries of what is permitted in sexual relations? How power and control mechanisms in gender relations are put in place in each society and how these are negotiated is also based on an internal dialogue which is constantly transpiring about sexual difference and equality.

Sexual difference and the Caribbean

The word 'feminism' has itself been part of the problem of feminism and writing on gender in the region. While such struggles and negotiations are and have been ongoing in the course of our history, as they are in most societies, the importation of a word brings with it the messages of gender in another culture. The image of the strident British suffragette has not been part of the history of Caribbean society, even while equally strident women have fought for nationhood and equality. The image of the 'bra-burning – sexually liberated' North American white woman in the 1960s has negative resonances in these parts. Where the word is used, as it must be, for a thing has to be named, it has to be constantly defined in context

as 'I am not a feminist like those . . .' or 'I am a feminist but I am not one of those man-hating . ..'. This is an ongoing irritant in this area of work and struggle in the Caribbean and the issue will no doubt persist.

At the same time, a crucial debate in feminist theory is itself being discussed within the region, but perhaps with a different vocabulary. The post-colonial, national and ethnic contestations for identity have been forced to create a place for the interrogation of gender identity, leading one to agree with Irigaray that 'Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age' (Irigaray 1993: 5). The current debates in learned feminist circles are focused on the issues of equality and difference. I think there is more or less agreement among scholars, north, south, east and west, that equality between the sexes can only be achieved if femininity and masculinity are both valued for their difference. That the opposition in sexual difference has proved to be a constraint now for further theorizing as well as activism (De Lauretis, 1987) has also become quite evident. Instead of reproducing these binary oppositions which we are simultaneously engaged in breaking down, feminist writing, I think, supports the idea that difference or equality between the sexes can be approached pragmatically. There are instances in which sexual difference must be argued for rather than equality across the board, as in the case of maternity leave in employment. The difference-equality concepts and debate can be more usefully applied as a heuristic device to generate new questions about gender and new research issues (Hermesen and Van Lenning, 1991), thus leading to novel insights. Like the early feminist search for the 'origins of patriarchy' this debate cannot be resolved at this point. Whether we are naturally different as a species, or whether we have control over the construction of our identities and potentialities, remain part of the ongoing evolution of sex and gender. The question for each society becomes a process of understanding its own constructions of masculinity and femininity, to identify the legacies and issues which are recalled in the reconstruction of gender and intersected ethnic identities.

The language of this struggle is also culturally specific. For the rest of this paper I briefly situate ways in which this debate is carried out in the region. First, a large number of women, if not the majority, have always worked outside of the home and, if not fully, then certainly have been largely responsible for the support of their households. As central figures in production, women have also provided the continuity to household and family life. The question of class differences and privilege among women is a more recently acquired twentieth-century issue among the majority of black, indian and coloured peoples. The region has inherited a generalized stereotype of woman in society as *matrifocal* or mother centred, often confused for matriarchal and matrilineal both of which are not at all

applicable. In this stereotyping women are not only assumed to possess extreme strength and resilience, but also to be responsible for the increasing *marginality* of the male. The paradox of both stereotypes rarely surface in popular discussions, although this has been debated to some degree at the level of scholarship (Smith, 1996; Barrow, 1996; Momsen, 1993). Matrifocality has not led to greater gender equality. Women's power in the home is equated with power in the society at large. Marginalization is rarely depicted as the relations between men and men, which is in fact the underlying subtext of two books by Errol Miller, *Marginalization of the Black Male* (1986), and *Men at Risk* (1991), both popular butts for feminist attacks in the region. Instead, marginalization is assumed to be the fault of female (over)achievers. Slavery was initially blamed for the emasculation of the male. The fact that women have emerged from the same system with their femininity and strength intact is often glossed over. Black men were shown little mercy or respect by the white élite and managerial class in matters pertaining to their personal lives. As shown in Thomas Thistlewood's Jamaican diary between 1750 and 1786,¹⁹ at least one record exists about the extent to which black masculinity suffered at the hands of another male grouping. Emasculation was tendered by extreme humiliation and pain as, for instance, seen in the following entry:

Friday, 30th July 1756: Punch caught at Salt River and brought home. Flogged him and Quacoo well, and then washed and rubbed in salt pickle, lime juice and bird pepper; also whipped Hector for losing his hoe, made New Negro Joe piss in his eyes & mouth &c.

(Hall, 1992: 73)

It was equally nourished by the conditions under which intimacy between black men and women in the new setting was persistently invaded by the assumed rights over their body by the master.

On the domestic scene, Mrs. Cope was brought to bed of a girl on the night of Saturday 26th; Mr. Cope was paying frequent nightly visits to Egypt where he would summon Little Mimer, for whom he had a passion until mid-April when he transferred his attentions to Sancho's wife, Cubbah.

(Hall, 1992: 93)

This legacy, together with that of being commodified, sold and bartered as property and the host of other indignities, has continued in other ways, in the stereotyping of black masculinity in the Caribbean, also evident in the United States of America. The question of why, out of this legacy, blame has been conferred on to black women, and women in general, for a persistent emasculation of the male, needs to be investigated thoroughly. Certainly the stereotyped notions of contemporary Caribbean reality is of 'female headed households' in which women are both provider and nurturer, and are consistently themselves blamed for the 'spoiling' of their sons

and husbands by inculcating irresponsible male behaviour as the norm. The feminist or women's attempt to achieve parity with men in various spheres is viewed, here as elsewhere, as an antagonistic measure to gain control over the other sex. The fact that women's struggles thus far in the region's political arena have been more than conciliatory, reconciling the need for ethnicity, nation and community and family with that of desire and intimacy, remains a persistently elusive part of the discussions which take place in the societies. None the less, there have always been supportive male colleagues or partners in this struggle for gender equality.

While this is the dominant discourse of the black diaspora, there is a continued interface with the gender systems of other groups who also live in the region, such that the idea of matrifocality and marginality, though still applicable in part, may take different forms in different societies. For instance, the presence of a large number of Indians in Trinidad and Guyana which has held firm to an ideology of patriarchal gender relations, creates differences in these apparently dominant ideas and perception of masculinity and femininity. Societies such as the Dominican Republic and Cuba, with large European Spanish populations, have other distinctions in gender systems as do societies influenced by the French, such as Haiti, Martinique and Guadeloupe. Belize is another uniquely developing situation, where, despite its similarity in the past to the English-speaking Caribbean islands, has had in the twentieth century a continuous influx of migrants from the neighbouring Spanish speaking central American populations, introducing into the society a Mayan group with an extremely patriarchal system of gender relations.²⁰ Much systematic research needs to be undertaken in these societies to establish a more comprehensive and accurate picture of the ongoing constructions of masculinity and femininity into the present.

If sexual difference in relation to economic survival and production is couched in largely antagonistic categories, the ideas of difference in sexualities between male and female is a firmly implanted one. In general men are allowed many partners, women are to be monogamous, although serial monogamy is acceptable as women are not expected to remain unmarried after the death of, or separation from, a husband or a partner. This different expectation of male and female sexuality is continually debated. Femininity is still defined in relation to virtue, motherhood and being a wife, while masculinity is at the same time bounded by expectations, as for instance that of being a provider, but allowed indefinite boundaries and privileges because 'he is man'. The debate on sexuality is by no means restricted to differences between men and women, but equally between women and women – all of which militates against a unified platform for gender consciousness. Much of this debate is contradictory. One dancehall lyricist appeals to a notion of working-class female sexuality as being free,

exuberant and untamed and therefore the most desired. The downtown girl is presumed to be the most libidinous 'Gimme the girl wid the wickedness slam' (Beanie Man) in opposition to the 'browning' who represents the 'uptown' middle-class ideal woman of mixed race who is limited in her performance by the control and reserve which she is made to assume. In Trinidad the idiom of the 'red' woman has fairly similar applications although perhaps not so sharply contested as in the Jamaican context where class differences are more stark. The origin of this ideal from the 'mulatto' woman bred in slavery needs to be traced in so far as both sexuality and power over other men clearly were intersected in the historical construction of sexuality within the region.

The commitment to sexual difference in the English-speaking Caribbean, in terms of the opposition between masculinity and femininity, is very fertile ground for gender analysis. In societies where black masculinity constantly seeks to assert itself, where it is defined as power over other men and in relation to multiple relationships with the other sex, where monogamy and fidelity are perceived as signs of weakness or of being a 'soft man', masculinity is itself a very fragile thing. This fragility is evident in the antagonism and distance which must be maintained from male homosexuality and from homosexuality itself, the latter which is in general unacceptable as an alternative sexuality in these parts. My understanding of the non-English speaking territories, especially that of the Dominican Republic, suggests that the 'machismo' culture is very similar. Ironically,

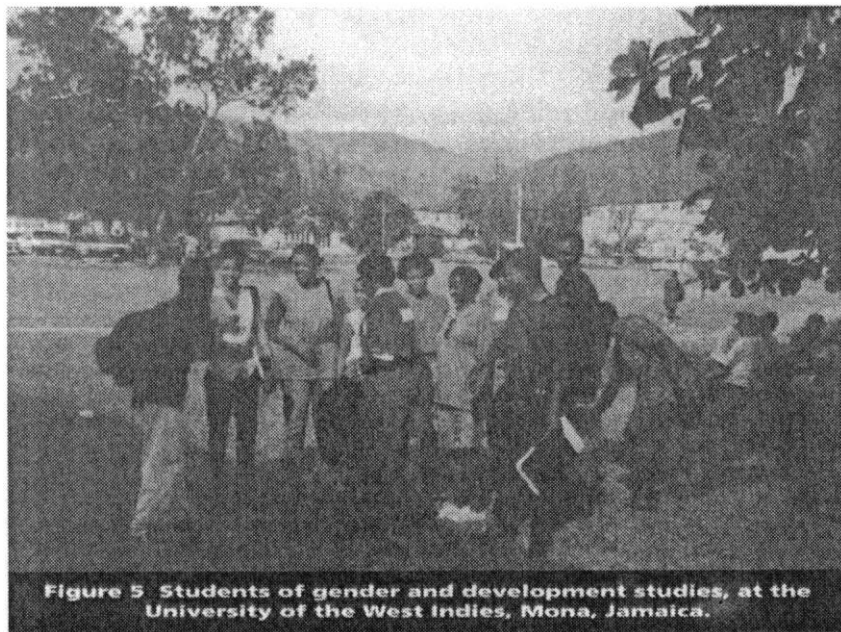


Figure 5 Students of gender and development studies, at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica.

again because of the shared legacies of colonization and continuing imperialism in which both masculinity and femininity have had to be defined in relation to the other, feminism has largely been, in my view, a nurturing one, a recognition of a shared condition, despite sexual difference and despite obvious inequalities. In the region, the construction of masculinity has emerged as an issue which is tackled by women and feminist scholars as it is now being treated seriously by some men.²¹

In the last decades of the twentieth century, for those who live in this stepping stone of islands and adjacent territories, between the north and south Americas, feminism provides a new lens to interrogate the past and renders new challenges and opportunities to establish boundaries of identity and difference. If the struggles for identity have also been about the desire to enrich the space and group to which we belong, then Caribbean feminism is itself an expression of the new conditions of that desire.

Notes

- 1 As will later be more fully explained, 'creole' born here refers to those born in the region itself.
- 2 This interpretation of the ongoing construction of gender identities under colonization is consistent with the ideas put forward in Teresa de Lauretis (1987) *Technologies of Gender*.
- 3 I use this term to signify this point of difference, and also as it resonates with the Marxist use of the word, building here on Ken Post's explanation in *Arise Ye Starvelings, the Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and its Aftermath* (1978, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff). Post writes that 'each moment of antagonistic contradiction continually recreates the other and is the condition of its existence, but their relationship is such that both cannot develop equally' p. 28.
- 4 References to Beatrice Greig's visits and activism in Trinidad is found in Reddock (1994) and Mohammed (1994b).
- 5 These stories are evident in the Ramayana, and are told and retold by the pundits or Hindu priests in Trinidad to each generation of Hindu men and women. These ideas, though part of Hindu mythology, were pervasive among all Indians in Trinidad despite religion. I have examined the recurrence and pervasiveness of mythology in informing gender ideals and roles, despite migration, in an article entitled 'Ram and Sita: The Reconstitution of Gender Identities among Indians in Trinidad through Mythology', in *Gendered Ideologies*, Christine Barrow (ed.) (1998, Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers).
- 6 These ideas are more fully developed in Patricia Mohammed (forthcoming) *Gender Negotiations in Trinidad 1917-1947*.

- 7 Discussions on Elma Francois and other women involved in the early labour struggles in Trinidad are well developed in Reddock (1994). Reddock also draws attention to the existence of branches of the UNIA in Trinidad, indicating another aspect of struggle within the region which I have not sufficiently developed in the text – that is the way in which the ideas and activism in one territory often affected and influenced the others creating its own internal dynamic. The labour struggles of the 1930s is a good example of how this takes place, as is the Grenada Revolution in the late 1970s early 1980s which affected the Caribbean in ways still being revisited by political scientists such as Brian Meeks.
- 8 There have been different interpretations of women's roles in the People's National Movement led by Eric Williams to the extent to which they brought and helped to sustain his power for near three decades, from 1956 to 1981. My own analysis of history leads me to a partial leniency with the 'consciousness' of gender in the past. While leaders and politicians have no doubt been aware of women's importance or crucial roles in various platforms, the consciousness of the time did not lead women themselves to demand equal treatment or recognition as the unspoken ideology of patriarchy affected both men and women.
- 9 In the Caribbean there is an extensive literature which is growing on the women of the past who have been active in many different ways in these struggles for gender equality. See, for instance, Linnette Vassal's *Voices of Jamaican Women 1898–1939* (1993, Kingston Jamaica: Department of History, University of the West Indies).
- 10 Richard Allsop discusses its etymology in the region. It was first used with pride by European colonists, especially the French, to refer to themselves as born and bred in the 'New World'. It later came to distinguish local breeds of livestock from imported, and by extension, in a system where slaves were viewed as property as well, to refer to locally born slaves to differentiate them from the original Africans brought under the system. Allsop notes that the status of the word then took a nose dive among the white population, but rose among the local population, thus creating two further distinctions. It was a label applied to a class of non-white persons of 'breeding' or an excluded class of 'ill-bred blacks'. In the latter sense, while unfairly applied, the word appeared to have returned to its original source. Two Spanish etymologists Corominas and Pascual, who have traced its origins to Portuguese also indicated that the word may have originally been of African origin used among the Negroes (*sic*) 'born in the Indies' to distinguish those 'born in Guinea from those born in America because they consider themselves more honourable and of better status than their children because they are born in the fatherland, while their children are born at home' (Allsop, 1996: 176–7).
- 11 When I was growing up as a child in the late 1950s in a village of Lengua in South Trinidad, a village primarily inhabited by Indians, the few persons of African descent who lived in this village were referred to as Creoles by all the Indians. For Indians it had possibly become synonymous with Africans. To my

knowledge its use was not pejorative, but rather to define difference of race, as everyone was accustomed to doing in this society to distinguish the many different groups which co-existed.

- 12 While this analysis focuses on the etymology of the term and its meaning for English-speaking societies in the region, I am aware that the mutation of language is similar for all societies. In Haiti, a French creole patois is the *langue parole*, in the Dominican Republic and Cuba as well as Puerto Rico, the Spanish varies from that spoken in Europe although the common base still exists. An Argentinian colleague once commented to another Dominican colleague in my hearing that he thought that the Dominicans spoke a 'bad Spanish', in the very same way that the various dialects of English spoken by those of us in the English-speaking Caribbean were thought to be 'bad English'. Near the end of writing this paper I have just come across a book entitled *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature and Identity* edited by Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnes Sourieau (1998, Jamaica: The Press, UWI). The collection of essays in this book bears out some of my suggestions in this section on a definition of the Caribbean as *creole*.
- 13 The allusion here to black US feminist Audre Lorde's famous statement of using the master's tools to demolish the master's house is deliberate and relevant for feminism in the Caribbean.
- 14 Yet there is mimicry inherent in its evolution. Many of the words we used in an Indian household in Trinidad to describe kitchen implements were derived from Bhojpuri Hindi, the dialect which was shared by the largest groups which came and therefore became the dominant one. For example, we 'balayed' the roti, meaning to roll out the dough. None of these have any meaning for a Hindi speaking Indian from India as it is the creation of a verb from a noun through the rules of English grammar and not those of Hindi. Yet this and other such terms are still widely used today in many Indian households. The emergence in Trinidad of the genre of music referred to as chutney/soca is itself a blend of the Indian with the soul music which emerged out of the United States and the calypso of Trinidad.
- 15 The work of Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood* (1993 London: Macmillan) is useful and more highly developed on these themes. From my reading, Cooper's work largely supports the points I am making. She looks at the emergence of the dancehall artist in Jamaica, examining the African resonances of this genre and arguing in this and subsequent writings that this popular culture form is an oral expression of nationalism from a hitherto silenced group.
- 16 By antagonism here I acknowledge that gender relations are also extremely ridden with conflicts and antagonism between men and women, women and women and men and men. My particular approach in this essay has been admittedly a bit one-sided, dwelling on the mutually negotiated aspects of gender relations as compared to the confrontations caused by its opposition. This was pointed out to me by Yaba Badoe, who also made many other very insightful comments on a draft of this paper, for which I am very grateful. I attempt to

deal with the antagonism which results from women's challenges to male patriarchy through the matrifocal/marginality debate in the region.

- 17 I lived for several years in the Netherlands. Before that I had also lived in the UK for some time. While in Britain, because I shared a language and past history, the messages of gender were clearer and more accessible. For the entire period of my stay in the Netherlands, because I had no real knowledge of the language, it was impossible for me to understand either the business of intimacy between men and women, or the subtle aspects of racism which were no doubt part of the black migrant's lived existence in this society.
- 18 I realize that from this point onwards, much of my analysis speaks directly to the English-speaking Caribbean. None the less, from my understanding of the other territories, as well as close association with persons from the different societies, I argue that many of these ideas of masculinity and femininity and the body are applicable across the region. For instance Huguette Dagenais in her paper 'Women of Guadeloupe: The Paradoxes of Reality' (in Momsen, 1993) comes to the same conclusion about the paradoxical status of the Guadeloupean woman as studies in the English-speaking territories do.
- 19 Douglas Hall selected and published extracts from Thomas Thistlewood's diary in a book entitled *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86* (1992, Macmillan, UK). Thistlewood lived in western Jamaica as a small landowner for 36 years. He was an inveterate diarist and he chronicled during this time, almost daily, the activities of himself and those around him, thus leaving a legacy which, despite its obvious limitations or personal biases, etc., also provide us with information which was otherwise not recorded in historical documents of the time.
- 20 While I have not studied this systematically, recently I worked in Belize with community-based workers involved in a project on Sexual and Reproductive Health sponsored by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, New York. Some of the problems and issues which confront women in the society are those expressed by the rural Mayan women of a very patriarchal control over their sexuality and lives.
- 21 See, for instance, articles in the First Symposium on Masculinity in the Caribbean hosted by the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at St Augustine, Trinidad in January 1996.

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