

Gender, Generation and Memory: Remembering a Future Caribbean¹
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Women Catalysts for Change (Dame Nita Barrow) Lecture
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My paternal grandmother died in 2003 at the age of 95. Some years earlier, she had begun to lose her short-term memory, although this did not diminish her ability to recall events in (what was for me) the distant past, complete with time of day, what she was wearing and doing, in absolutely astonishing and minute detail. There is a medical diagnosis for this condition, but in the context of what I want to offer tonight, I sometimes wonder whether my grandmother's selective forgetting indexed the fact that, in the dusk of her life, there was little that was memorable in the contemporary Caribbean.

This is a provocatively harsh opening, one that a glance at any Human Development Report – which notes that the Caribbean experience is one of political stability and relatively high social indicators - will challenge, but for Caribbean women and men like myself who came of age or were born in the decade of the 1980s and after, I say this deliberately in order to register that there is little of the anticipation and excitement that animated the pre-independence era. There is little sense of how popular discontent with the emerging political order's refusal to effect a radical break from the colonial past was channeled collectively, and of the energy that accompanied a number of radical social and political experiments in the decade of the 1970s, culminating in the Grenadian revolution in 1979. A vibrant women's movement came into its own during these years, drawing on the creative energies of those who had been nurtured by the promise of citizenship, only to find that the place of women in an independent Caribbean

was anything but equal (feminist M. Jacqui Alexander refers to this as the betrayal of the promise which found expression in her Trinidad in the lines ‘Every creed and race finds an equal place’). This was the period that produced Development Alternatives With Women for a New Era (DAWN), which included women from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, as well as calls, led by the Global South, for a New International Economic Order.

These times, which in different ways appeared to offer rich and radical hope of transformation for all across the region, seem lost now from the vantage point of a present caught up in the singular logic of neoliberal globalization (what several observers refer to as a new moment of global empire), in which democracy is linked to the free market, where commodification extends into more and more aspects of our lives, where purchasing power is increasingly the criteria for citizenship, where a US led war of terror is carried out in the name of protecting these ‘freedoms’, a war that has touched down in the Caribbean in holding pens in Guantanamo Bay.

In the Caribbean, more than two decades after the introduction of structural adjustment programmes (and in the 1980s, the women’s movement was one of the few places where there was an organized campaign against the impact of economic liberalization on households and women), the region’s future seems more than ever mortgaged to the interests of international capital, and what do we have to show for it? Dependence on single and primary crops (the Caribbean remains wedded to an unsustainable agricultural model, see Weis 2007) and services (particularly tourism) has not shifted, underlining the vulnerability of our overall position even for the more developed economies among us that have not, for example, been affected by the steady

erosion of preferential arrangements under the WTO vis-à-vis sugar and banana regimes. In broad terms, we face an extremely high rate of HIV infection, by some counts the second highest infection rates in the world; growing income inequalities in many countries; alarmingly high levels of violence, described by economist Norman Girvan (2007) as poor-on-poor, poor-on-not-so-poor, state-on-poor, community-on-community; increasing levels of functional illiteracy; limited job opportunities; unsustainable out-migration rates, with a recent study finding that the largest percentage of migrants with tertiary education to OECD countries came from Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, with figures ranging from 76% to 83%. Notwithstanding some feminist successes and claims of male marginalization (a most misplaced accusation which has been effectively challenged by Eudine Barriteau among others, but which according to Gabrielle Jamela Hosein has greatly complicated women's organising), women continue to lag behind men in political representation and experience higher rates of unemployment and poverty (especially among female-headed households), while domestic and sexual violence continue to be a daily feature of women's lives.

Unlike the momentous shifts that we have witnessed in Latin American politics in recent years, in which candidates (one of them indigenous, two of them women) have been elected on platforms that – to varying degrees, from Venezuela to Argentina – openly challenge the impact of neoliberal reforms, there is no sense of a sea change on the political horizons of the Caribbean (I read Caribbean newspapers online regularly, and am constantly amazed by how little coverage there is of what is going on right at our backdoor. We seem to really lack a hemispheric consciousness). With rare exceptions the difference between parties is one of degree not substance, with the logic of the

Washington Consensus not the subject of fundamental critical appraisal in public debate, its *fait accompli* status never challenged. I am no pollster, but judging from my conversations with friends and colleagues and observations of the state of play in countries like Guyana, there appears to be widespread disaffection with the political status quo, an overriding sense that the more things change, the more they damned well remain the same.

Outside of the formal political process, the regenerative potential of civil society has been dulled by what I would call NGO-speak, which has transformed it into a sanitized, depoliticized space dominated by the language of ‘stakeholders’ looking for ‘good governance’. Even the transgressive promise of the women’s movement has been blunted by the discovery, mainstreaming and neutralization of gender by the very same institutions that prop up economic and social policies that require the continued sacrifice of women’s labour. In Trinidad and Tobago, Gabrielle Jamela Hosein comments wryly that in some ways the limited successes of feminism in crossing some institutional barriers has led to greater ideological conservatism among a younger generation of women who shy away from identifying themselves as feminist (personal correspondence, November 7, 2007). She also notes that young women seem to draw on an individualistic language of self-respect and do not make sustained links between their experiences and the wider landscape in which such inequalities are embedded (Hosein, 2007). This in a country that is home to the regional Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA)! We might well ask whether neo-liberal emphases on the self are being manifested in the ways in which responses to discontent are increasingly individualized and privatized.

These are the challenges that face activists today as we engage a new generation. I want to begin to think about this by suggesting that the status quo in the region is enabled by a deadening and deadly social amnesia which short-circuits the possibility of thinking otherwise. This is not to say there is no history in the present, but to question what we have come to accept as a legitimate narrative of how we arrived at this point, where the only change that we are told matters is the five year cycle when the votes are mobilised, the speeches are made, a 'new' government is elected, the flag is raised, and business continues, more or less as usual. What we have in stock offers us this present we currently inhabit as our eternal future, and calls it independence.

But this is the opening of my talk, not its dismal conclusion! Therefore, to start again with my grandmother, might there be another way of reading her short-term forgetfulness, in which we learn to listen to the early recounting of an ordinary woman's everyday life? She worked as a domestic for thirteen years and was a single parent with one child, who her brother helped to raise. In her later years she worked with her husband on the farm he managed on the Essequibo coast. It is a life that gets missed by the history books and officially managed narratives of the past, but which offers us a glimpse into another present, another future, lurking in the shadows. I suggest that there is a more hopeful and capacious angle of vision to be apprehended here.

It is a real honour to be speaking in a series named for Dame Nita Barrow, a woman with a truly regional outlook. I draw on three dimensions of her life to organize my reflections this evening, and as a way of participating in a process of remembering her (and also recognizing the debt I owe to a generation of feminists, many of whom continue their work in and out of the region to this day). She might not have agreed with

everything I will say, but paying homage should always be in the interest of extending a conversation while recognizing its various origins. Otherwise there would never be anything to say.

The first is that the social geography of her personal and professional life gesture towards a Pan-Caribbean identity. In addition to Barbados, I am told that her family connections embraced St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Tobago and St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and she is described as having worked in almost every Caribbean territory (including, given our migration rates to the US, New York!). Secondly, she was a member (and the only woman) of a seven person Commonwealth team that visited South Africa in 1985 to witness the conditions faced by the Black majority and to offer recommendations for dialogue between the Botha regime and leaders of the anti-apartheid resistance. Thirdly, in 1983 she was convenor of the NGO Forum for the Decade of Women in Nairobi, Kenya. If the first two suggest themes – Caribbean movement and political conflict - to be taken up here, the third highlights Dame Nita's commitment to social justice and gender equality, and a sense that the terrain of politics requires expansion beyond a focus on state power, to include the myriad other domains in which the business of living is carried out, and where women can be found. Thus my presentation will explore, through a discussion of xenophobia occasioned by migration and the politics of polarization and division, how a collective social amnesia has worked to effect the marginalization of Caribbean peoples. Looking at the operation of gender in each of these examples, I hope to suggest ways in which we might rework narratives of exclusion, through a preliminary discussion of counter-memories embedded in practices that do not follow the logic of borders, internally or externally imposed.

Let me begin, then, with recent Guyanese media coverage of trade and business links with Barbados. Reports of an official Barbadian delegation's successful visit to the trade and investment exhibition GUYEXPO were followed by the Government of Guyana's invitation to Barbadians to lease land at a reduced rate, an overture that prompted a letter to the Guyanese newspapers which noted, "I also have not seen reciprocity; of course we have a big heart and a bench at Grantley Adams international." (Stabroek Daily News, October 24th, 2007). The reference nudged an uncomfortable memory out of its hiding place. On July 19, 2005, I was at the Cheddi Jagan International airport in Guyana with my two daughters, waiting to return to Toronto via Trinidad and Tobago. There was also a flight leaving for Barbados, and I recognized a few passengers. A few days later I learned that most of those individuals had never made it past what is dubbed "the Guyanese bench" at Grantley Adams airport. I believe over two score were deported in one day. Thinking about this event in preparation for today's lecture, I realized I had no idea how the mass deportation was dealt with in the Barbadian public sphere. Curious, I decided to search the online national newspaper archives. Two hours later I had filled sixty pages with columns, letters and editorials, dating back over two years (the internet blogs are another matter altogether). While the importance of a constructive and open dialogue can never be underestimated, I was stunned by the vitriol against Guyanese in much of what I was reading. Words like flood and swamp suggested that Barbados was vulnerable and open to invading hordes (the gendered dimension is clear here) who threatened the country's social equilibrium, notwithstanding statements by the Barbadian government that the numbers of Guyanese in the country could not support such a conclusion. In letters to the press, images emerged of squatting and

overcrowding (the dirty, anti-social Guyanese), of illegal access to scarce social services and free medical care (the duplicitous and greedy Guyanese), of threats to law and order (the criminal Guyanese), of a political imbalance, with at least one opposition politician speculating that the voters' list could be artificially inflated (the cheating Guyanese), of immigrants accepting lower wages and undercutting Barbadian labour (the Guyanese scab). Indian-Guyanese were singled out and racialised as particularly incapable of integrating, and of threatening to import Guyana's 'ethnic' problem into the island.

Anxieties around borders also turned crucially on questions of sexuality. In some of the online blogs, women were singled out as preying on unsuspecting Barbadian men in order to get themselves legalised (the immoral and sexually loose Guyanese). The Barbadian prostitute was even momentarily 'rehabilitated' in order to make the argument that she was put out of business by Guyanese women willing to do more for less. Given what we know throughout the region about the general association in the public imagination between prostitution and moral decay - even as sex workers are integral to the tourist industry and therefore to regional economies - this calling up of the local prostitute to defend the Barbadian nation perfectly illustrates the point that women are the grounds on which claims to community are made which ultimately displace them, which is to say at the end of the day it is not really about women and the inequalities they experience at all. That sexuality is one of the fulcra on which this controversial conversation has pivoted should not surprise us, since concerns about immigration are always simultaneously concerns around reproduction, and one can point to numerous other examples in the region and beyond of this kind of policing of the allegedly pure national body from contamination or penetration by the other. So many Haitian children

born in the Dominican Republic to Haitian parents are ineligible for public services (including education) because they are not entitled to identity papers; nor does having one Dominican parent necessarily guarantee such security. In this case we see how state regulations attempt to circumscribe and reorder people's lives in the name of something called 'Dominican national identity'. By denying or refusing to recognize the myriad unscripted ways in which people chance upon, live and love each other, different categories of belonging are created, rendering some families less normal or less valued. This is similar, by the way, to how we tend to think of households headed by women as secondary to the nuclear/male breadwinner family, despite the fact that they represent the family experience of over forty percent of children in the region, or the laws that outlaw lesbian and gay sex and make criminals and non-citizens out of all of us whose desires refuse to be strai(gh)tjacketed.

My kids have come to Barbados on several occasions (my father made this his home between 1997 and 2004), and I am fortunate to be able to take them to Guyana each year to instill in them an understanding of their rich heritage. And yet, wading through this material, I could not help feeling that this belonging was somehow precarious, that the Caribbean I was claiming could also impose its own cruel exclusions. And I wonder, had we been on the plane to Barbados that day, how would my children have made sense of the interminably long lines and the distress that must have been on the faces of many Guyanese?

Given the contemporary economic disparities between Barbados and Guyana, the direction of the traffic is predictable. At the same time, I want to suggest that in several of the press reports, the spotlight on Guyanese appeared to obscure a disquiet or unease over

the internal distribution of resources. That is to say, Bajans may have been represented in this discourse as the haves and Guyanese as the have-nots who threaten the real citizens' high standard of living, but this projected image of a unified national community cannot always paper over the inequalities that generate divisions between Barbadians, for which Guyanese should not be scapegoated and cannot be asked to answer.

I have begun with Barbados because this is where we are this evening, and not because there is anything peculiarly Barbadian about this pattern. So we need to move past defensiveness and address the wider context, in order to engage each other. Across the region, one can point to numerous other cases, like the widely documented brutal treatment of Haitian sugar workers in the Dominican Republic. If we cast our net even wider we begin to see that what takes place in the region is not so different from what Caribbean people – in different ways – face 'up North', 'in foreign'. Research has shown how movement is regulated at various points to respond to the differently gendered needs and demands of global capitalism. Take for example the domestic, seasonal hotel and temporary farmworker programmes that recruit Caribbean women and men as workers to Canada and the United States, all of which are based on a presumption that while the workers' labour is required to produce value, their own lives are treated as worthless, and their families and the costs of social reproduction must remain as far as possible outside the borders of the host country. These jobs are gendered, women doing the feminised (hotel and maid) and men the masculinised (agricultural) work, in a context in which both kinds of jobs have little status and have become associated with immigrants, non-citizens, people of colour. It sends the message that we can treat some people differently because they are not one of us, notwithstanding the reality that it is the largely invisible and

exploited labour of these so-called others that creates and maintains the scaffolding of the destination economies, a point that was beautifully made in relation to the Barbados-Guyana saga by Prime Minister Owen Arthur. Instead of seeing the immigrant as the problem, we might usefully ask ourselves how immigrant labour, and particularly female immigrant labour, serves an economy geared so heavily to the tourist industry, and the benefit their tenuous legal status provides to employers. This is the integral underbelly of capitalist development, what is popularly called globalization today. Moreover, I am sure that any one of us could recount a story of a family member or friend enduring humiliating treatment at ports of entry in Miami, New York, London or Toronto. When we look at how we handle our own affairs in relation to visitors and workers from other Caribbean islands, should the similarities not give us pause? There should be nothing comfortable in such familiarity. In an interview, literary scholar Gordon Rohlehr offers the opinion that nationalism necessarily requires and offers little sympathy to the stranger, and that in the aftermath of the collapse of the West Indies Federation, in each country that went its separate – national – way, “the Other became the other Caribbean person” (2003, 253). With CARICOM discussions over freedom of movement and the Single Market and Economy, what do these popular anxieties over borders tell us about the tensions between the local and the global, the regional and the resolutely, at times xenophobically national?

The stories we tell ourselves are based on a kind of collective amnesia. So it suits us today, for instance, to see Haiti not as the country that gave the world the promise of Black sovereignty over two centuries ago, but as the poorest island in the Western Hemisphere, or to see Guyanese as lowest on the totem pole of the Anglophone

Caribbean, notwithstanding the fact that at one point it was seen as breadbasket of the Caribbean and still potentially has that capacity; it is also our gateway to deeper relations with our Latin American neighbours and a broader regional vision. We would do well to challenge this selective forgetting. For starters, we forget that the movement of people between countries ebbs and flows and changes direction. In a presentation to the Association of Caribbean Historians 9th Annual Conference, held thirty years ago at Cave Hill, Walter Rodney (1977) reminded us of a reverse wave in the late nineteenth century, when Barbadians, facing what many saw as limited opportunities on the island, headed to Guyana to seek their futures (my grandmother's husband, for instance, was Kenneth Sobers, a common Barbadian surname if there ever was one!). In a newspaper article, Deputy Prime Minister Mia Mottley noted that the exodus was perceived to be so great that the Barbadian House of Assembly debated whether restrictions should be placed on those seeking to leave.

Historicizing current anti-immigrant sentiment is also necessary to short-circuit an unhelpful Guyanese moral triumphalism or self-righteous indignation (at one point we helped you, and this is how you repay us). We see, with some humility, how we are all potentially complicit, how Guyanese have been equally capable of the behaviour we complain about today (in fact, there are similar rumblings of disquiet today in Guyana about the increasing numbers of Brazilians in the country). The impulse to make common political cause through the shared exploitation faced by local Blacks, indentured Indians, and Barbadian estate labourers was often tempered by anti-immigrant feelings, which came to the fore in times of economic distress. In one report, Barbadians were being threatened “because [they] work more and at a lower rate than [the Creoles] do” (Royal

Gazette, 1868, cited in Rodney, 1977). And Reverend Bronkhurst observed in 1883 that “...Every Hindu, every Badian, every islander is an abomination unto the Creole blacks of the Colony” (Bronkhurst, 1883, cited in Rodney, 1977). Here we see how an immigration system designed to thwart the aspirations and cripple the bargaining power of the Afro-Guyanese working-classes in the post-slavery period, would pit those who occupied the most marginal positions in Guianese society against each other.

Gordon Rohlehr, describing the Caribbean as “a society of immigrants” (2003, p. 248), notes the presence of Grenadians, Vincentians and Barbadians in Trinidad and Tobago from the late nineteenth century. Anti-immigrant sentiment – again this peaked under conditions of economic hardship - expressed itself through the popular medium of calypso; one of the songs in the early 1940s was titled ‘Small Island, Go Back Where you Really Come From’. Stereotypes also cohered around the Barbadian as mean, smart and a trickster, with the accent definitively branding the small islander as a permanent outsider. Rohlehr cites a calypso sung by Blakey in the 1950s, *Send Them Back*, in which the Grenadians’ inability to pronounce ‘box’ the Trini way gives them away to the authorities. This business of language and enunciation denotes social status and sets the boundaries of difference, sometimes in exceedingly violent ways. Across the same Caribbean sea, tens of thousands of Haitian women, men and children were massacred and evicted from the Dominican Republic in 1937 under the Trujillo regime. In *Farming of the Bones*, novelist Edwidge Danticat recalls the ritual use of the herb parsley, folded seamlessly into the cycle of collective Haitian life: “We used pesi, perejil, parsley, the damp summer morningness of it, the mingled sprigs, bristly and coarse, gentle and docile all at once, tasteless and bitter when chewed, a sweetened wind inside the mouth, the

leaves a different taste than the talk, all this we savored for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides of old aches and griefs, to shed a passing year's dust as a new one dawned, to wash a new infant's hair for the first time and – along with boiled orange leaves – a corpse's remains one final time” (1998, p. 62). This reassuring depth is brutally eviscerated when parsley threatens to betray Haitian-ness. In the final section of the novel, which addresses the massacre, whether one was killed or left to live turned on one's ability to pronounce parsley with a Dominican Spanish accent (as opposed to one contaminated by Haitian Kreyol), in which the attackers listened for “the trill of the r or the precision of the j” as signs of the authentic native speaker, fluent in the mother tongue (1998, p. 193).

One wonders whether it is ever really possible to definitively identify, expel and obliterate the Haitian. Or is the categorical violence of such acts required to erase and deny the interwoven complexities of Haitian-Dominican relations on the ground? Moreover, it is the Haitian whose multilingual competence (in at least Spanish and Kreyol) offers a tentative promise of neighbourliness, but this matters little when the need to find the stranger among us is so deeply compelling. These are disturbing reminders, more troubling still because they continue to resonate across place and time (there have since been several *en masse* deportations of Haitians from the Dominican Republic). In her recently published memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), Danticat's 80 year old sick Haitian uncle, with a valid US tourist visa, is held at the Krome Detention Centre in Miami, where he eventually collapses and later dies. His earthly remains were interred in New York, making him “part of the soil of a country that had not wanted him” (p. 251). Distressed, Danticat's dying father observes, in a comment that encapsulates the tragedy

of Haiti, a country that gave the world an early lesson in freedom from racial intolerance and where Black people today continue to pay the price for that courage, “He shouldn’t be here...If our country were ever given a chance and allowed to be a country like any other, none of us would live or die here” (p. 251).

While remembering can enable us to historicize contemporary exclusions and recognize our own implicatedness, it can also serve a more hopeful purpose. If we start with the gendered lives and survival strategies of women and men, their uneven circulation and mobility stitch the Caribbean together in ways that make it impossible to insist on separability over connection. The fact that earlier migration patterns tended to be heavily male (in contrast to today, where women equal and at times even outnumber men in migration statistics, especially to the UK and North America), should not distract us from thinking about where the women went and what they did, for while many remained to take care of those left behind when their menfolk departed (bringing to mind the folk song, ‘brown skin gal, stay home and mind baby, I goin’ away on a sailin’ boat an’ if ah don’t come back, throw ‘way de damn baby’), women also extended their lives into new geographies. In some cases they were responding to official labour schemes like the domestic worker programmes in Canada, while in other instances they traveled as individuals and in staggered form as members of wider family units. Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando’s documentary, *My Footsteps in Baragua*, captures the importance of women to organizing and reproducing community in these destinations. The oldest migrant is a Barbadian octagenarian, fluent in Spanish and at home in Baragua. Despite having left Barbados more than sixty years ago, she says wistfully and with clear Bajan intonations, “I would like to go home yes”. It is a community, moreover, in which

gendered intimacies blur national differences, for every family featured in the film contains members who can track their ancestry to different islands – Barbados, Trinidad, Grenada and so on. Food (peas and rice, coccoo, ackee and saltfish), the preparation of which remains women’s work, also emerges as a key element of cultural memory and inter-generational transmission.

It would be folly to assume a straightforward gendered divide in which women’s contributions related to cultural transmission and the space of the household, while men’s occupied what is often rendered as the more encompassing space of the political. There is also a problem in not seeing the work that women do in the family as political, or relegating it somehow – and usually as afterthought – to the secondarily political. We know something of migrant men’s activism in such destinations as Panama and Costa Rica, and there is interest in tracking whether and how this shaped later labour struggles as they returned to the Anglophone Caribbean. As Merle Collins writes in *Tout Moun ka Pléwé (Everybody Bawling)*, a beautiful meditation that ties the cycles of tropical storms and hurricanes to Grenada’s political history, “...hurricane forming right inside Grenada self, hurricane coming back from other Caribbean country too, from Aruba, from Trinidad, from America, from England, from all the places Grenadian people go to get a little pankwai (a little something) when things get rough. Is not now Grenadians, and in fact, all Caribbean people, going out and coming back” (2007, p. 5). Labour leaders and activists in the different islands also frequently originated from somewhere else (one well-known female example that we know about is Elma Francois, originally from St. Vincent, in Trinidad, see Reddock, 1988). And the diasporic turn in the academy has unearthed for us the myriad roles played by Caribbean men in all kinds of struggles, from

the Garveyite movement to Pan-Africanism. We need more work like this that refuses to be disciplined by a narrowly nationalist frame, but we would also do well to extend and recast what does exist by asking different questions of the material (for instance, what kinds of community did these men envision, and how did the terms of belonging address differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation?)ⁱ, and by exploring the ways in which women emerge as complex political actors in their own right. There are some examples that point us in this direction: Women in the Garveyite movement, some of whom had relocated to the Caribbean from the United States; Francophone Caribbean women's participation in Pan-Africanism in Paris (Edwards, 2003); Claudia Jones, feminist, communist and Black internationalist with an articulate critique of how race, class and sex intersected under capitalism and who was firmly committed to putting Blacks and women on the agenda of the communist party. She migrated to the United States from Trinidad and Tobago at age nine, never returning to the region (one account of her life suggests a Barbadian paternal lineage), and was deported (she used the term exiled) to England for her communist affiliations, where she launched the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News* and also helped create what we know today as London's Notting Hill Carnival. She was part of a generation of West Indians in diaspora committed to a truly independent Caribbean, and whose insistent presence (the Caribbean as witness, we might call it) testified to the ways in which the contours of British identity were fundamentally shaped by empire (see Boyce-Davies, 2003). As one text suggests, "...to be West Indian, in this sense, was a strategy to live with the dislocations imposed by migration" (Schwarz, 2003, p. 16). Dying prematurely at age 49, her grave sits beside and fittingly, as a soon to be published book points out (Boyce-Davies, 2008), to the left

of Karl Marx in Highgate cemetery, with the inscription “valiant fighter against racism and imperialism who dedicated her life to the progress of socialism and the liberation of her own Black people.”

Surely the lesson here is that it is a futile exercise to think of each country as separate if we were to take these trajectories seriously. Instead, what we see are social, economic, political and cultural transnational encounters that connect and go beyond the region as well as give each country its unique stamp. In her challenge to traditional push-pull frameworks, geographer Elizabeth Thomas-Hope describes Caribbean migration as having ‘generated its own dynamic with its own element of freedom’ (Thomas-Hope, 1992, pp. 165). It is an inescapable part of our sensibilities, of who we are. It seems to me, then, that it is movement and not borders which is naturally Caribbean, by which I mean it is a continuously defining element of our collective historical experience and memory. We are caught between nationalist preoccupations that require the design and management of policies regulating the flow of people across the region, and another plane of reality that confounds this logic on a daily basis, that illustrates how “...particular historical and structural conditions have produced cultural predispositions toward imagining community in global terms and enabled a matching cultural circuitry for building translocal images” (Carnegie, 2002, p. 80).

This is of course most obvious today in the unofficial intra-regional ‘people’ networks, perhaps best embodied in the trader, whose symbolic red, white and blue striped bag at the airport counter has become an instantly recognizable accessory. In Guyana, and mainly in response to the food bans imposed with no consultation and little preparation in the 1980s in the name of growing and buying local under co-operative

socialism, it was women who, with men and ahead of men, trekked in and out of the country by plane, boat and overland, who endured numerous hassles at border points as well as harassment and even imprisonment for trading in what were deemed contraband goods, who bargained with their bodies and whatever else they had, and who contributed to an informal economy that kept households fed and going in the lean years. As one opposition newsheet at the time noted, “What we are seeing in the small traders’ struggle is the most effective civil disobedience campaign ever carried out for such a long period in Guyana” (Open Word, 15, No. 41, 1982). Carla Freeman (2001) paints a picture of Barbadian women in the data-processing export sector who supplement their income by making short trips to Miami and Puerto Rico for items that they mark up and sell at home. Charles Carnegie draws our attention to the central role played by women in inter-regional agricultural trade. He urges a starting point that would reckon with these itinerant, everyday activities that transgress national boundaries as a matter of course, commenting that “...women’s transborder activities are institutionalized and routine – very much part of settled island life” (Carnegie, 2002, p. 84). From Guyana to Suriname, St. Lucia to Martinique and Guadeloupe, Barbados to Puerto Rico, there is a way in which we can also read these actions as a form of popular regionalism not circumscribed by linguistic divisions.

I find it ironic – but sadly not surprising, because again it confirms the ways in which women’s labour remains largely invisible and undervalued, even though on paper there has been official recognition as far back as the UN Conference on Women in 1985 to recognize and measure the significance of women’s unpaid labour - that so much of the pronouncements emanating from CARICOM on freedom of movement under the

CSME have emphasized ‘skilled labour’, a definition that surely excluded these women while misrecognising not only the skill involved, but the centrality of their work in sustaining regional economies. One study concludes that targeting skilled workers results in an “elitist common market” that “effectively alienates the majority of persons living in this region from what should perhaps be a fundamental right within an economic community” (Wickham et al, 2004). It is also important to think about the ways in which gender and class intersect in relation to these provisions. Given the high percentage of female graduates from UWI since the late 1980s, they potentially benefited from the freeing up of skilled labour. Notably, however, teachers, nurses, domestic and hospitality workers, higglers and artisans were not among the first categories approved for freedom of movement, even though they represent precisely those women who, as Guyanese activist Andaiye has contended, have long made the Caribbean a single economic space (and although in principle self-employed service providers, domestic workers, teachers and nurses are now free to move in principle, as Norman Girvan notes the practice is another matter entirely, personal correspondence, November 9th, 2007). There is much press given these days to the Caribbean Single Market and Economy, and of course we hope that some genuine semblance of this will occur, more than three decades after the establishment of the regional movement, but ask any woman who trades regularly and informally what the CSME means to her, and I am sure we will get a sense of the distance between the decisions taken by trade ministers in closed rooms and those who continue to face the hassles of making livelihoods at the grassroots.

As we know, the antecedents to these contemporary border crossers are the Caribbean higglers/hucksters/traders (rechristened in the academy and policy circles as

informal commercial importers), whose innovative practices can be traced to early desires for autonomy in relation to the slave plantation economy. This wellspring of tradition continues to be drawn upon and renewed, even in ways that are connected to but located outside of the Caribbean proper. Consider this example, for which the traveling bus is both a literal dimension of experience as well as an apt metaphor of Caribbean itineraries: A brisk Fall evening. Buses pull up at a strip mall in Toronto, Canada. Groups of predominantly women and some children mill around; as one draws closer one hears the unmistakable cadence of island talk, island accents. Welcome to international travel, Caribbean style. These chartered ‘tours’, advertised by word of mouth and weekly advertisements in community newspapers, are mainly organized by Caribbean women. For half the price of the official services which leave from the downtown Dundas Street terminal, you can catch a bus from Toronto and its suburbs which leaves on Friday night, deposits weary Caribbean travelers eleven hours later on the pavements of Church Avenue, Brooklyn, and returns them on Monday in time for the rhythms of a busy Toronto workweek. These travelers have a foot in *at least* three localities (Toronto, New York and the Caribbean). Their frame of reference is multilayered, with different temporalities and seasons jostling for attention: Canadian and American holidays that fall on a long weekend; significant Caribbean events like the Labor Day carnival in New York; popular weekend day excursions to flea markets and shopping malls in upstate New York, Detroit and Pennsylvania. They travel to visit family and friends, attend celebrations, bury loved ones, patronize Caribbean businesses, hunt for bargains, engage in buying and selling (this is the Caribbean higgler reinvented across a North American borderland), ‘take a break’, in short to make lives for themselves as Caribbeans ‘up

North' (see Trotz, 2006).

It should come as no surprise that this informal cross-border traffic is female-dominated. Women tend to be the ones most involved in maintaining active kinship networks, as observed by literary theorist Carole Boyce Davies' description of her mother, which resonates with my own mother's life these days: 'She also lives in that in-between space that is neither here nor there, locating herself in the communities where her children, grandchildren, family and friends reside' (Boyce Davies 1994, p. 1). Years ago – and before it became a fashionable adjective – I came across an essay by Rosina Wiltshire Brodber on the transnational family in the Caribbean. The fact that there continues to be such a strong association between the household and women's caring labour that maintains it, accounts partly for the dynamism of the bus charter operation. As one woman I spoke to pointed out, "Let me tell you why mostly women travel. Men...don't want to think women are very strategic with money. Women are. Because women know how to plan. Women know when to buy. Women know the deals and the quality. So women are more able, especially women who have families and children." What we are faced with is a transnational support strategy for households stretched across at least three locations (international financial institutions have belatedly recognized the significance of remittances in undergirding economies ravaged by structural adjustment programmes, with an IADB study released last month revealing that Caribbean migrants sent home over US\$8 billion in remittances last year. Their response appears to be to figure out ways of using people's popular responses to crisis – and we should be clear, remittances are, by and large, a grassroots response - to further entrench neo-liberal policies. But that is another matter). One woman I know brought goods back for her

home and to sell within her Toronto network. She also set aside some for the barrel occupying a prominent and permanent place in her kitchen, and which, when full, would be sealed and dispatched to her family in the Caribbean, with another immediately taking its place.

I want to suggest that these women - the entrepreneurs who run the service as well as their clientele - present us with a familiar instance of lives that are sustained and nourished through the dynamics of crossing. They reference an incredible vibrancy that not only refuses to be confined to/in a single place, but that insists on inventing complex new geographies of desire and belonging. For a variety of reasons we could infer that the women do not return to the Caribbean (and indeed many have not taken a flight back to the region in years, or since they left), but such a conclusion depends on seeing the Caribbean narrowly as fixed co-ordinates on a map that correspond to territory and ocean. Again, borders loom, threatening to cut us off from each other, denying the lesson these women's journeys promise. I want to suggest that these regularized trips, to Caribbean people in places other than the Caribbean and to Caribbean places outside of the region, are in fact a form of return, of weekly homage, to an idea of the Caribbean to which our travellers remain faithful. It is these women, unnoticed by most - except perhaps the border patrols, and do they not follow the same logic, whether they are in Buffalo, Port-of-Spain, Nassau, Miami? – who renew memory by extending a rich historical legacy into new terrain, and who continue to offer us a more expansive, connected and less jealously guarded map of this region that is our shared inheritance. As one woman said to me, “in my sleep, I dream in more than one place. Sometimes when I wake up, for a minute I don't know whether I in Toronto or Trinidad”.

I want to shift register now, and use the remaining time to mention some work that is just getting off the ground in Guyana by a women's group, Red Thread, of which I am a member, and which is organized in the first instance around gathering oral histories and other material relating to the racial disturbances that tore the country apart in 1964. We believe that the contemporary manifestations of inter-racial suspicion and fear which have intensified in the years following the return to electoral democracy in 1992 (and which have been accompanied by violence following the 1997 and 2001 elections), can only be understood and addressed in the context of a deeper, historical rupture in Guyanese society that followed the dissolution, after 133 days in office, of the multi-racial, anti-colonial coalition that came to power in 1953 under the premiership of Dr. Cheddi Jagan. External intervention and covert destabilization by the British and Americans helped split the nationalist movement along racialised lines and would eventually result in the PPP's defeat by a coalition government in December 1964, an election that followed years of strikes, riots, and culminated in the explosion of brutal violence between African and Indian Guyanese on the coastal belt.

Little is said about this period these days, and what is uttered is cynically manipulated in the interest of one or the other of the two dominant political parties. One of the few novels that deals with this period, Grace Nichols' lyrical *Whole of a Morning Sky* (taken from a Martin Carter poem), puts it thus: "No one knew how the beatings and killings started or who really started them first. The Indians blamed the black people. The black people blamed the Indians. And years later, when it was all over, both races liked to pretend it had never happened, or that it was some kind of dream ghost, best laid to peace and forgotten forever." (Nichols, 1986, p.137). There seems to be an overall investment

in silencing the past. But the traces of 1964 are everywhere, infiltrating the interstices of everyday life and imprisoning our imaginations. The ghosts of that period do not merely haunt us, they overwhelm us. It is estimated that over 200 persons lost their lives, while thousands of families were displaced by the disturbances, forced to leave multi-ethnic communities, homes and friends they had grown up with, to seek refuge and rebuild shattered lives in neighbouring villages with others who they often did not know, but were presumed to simply because they ‘looked like them’. Many left the country altogether, an outflow of people that has become a hemorrhage today. Division has been the legacy bequeathed to a post-1964 generation of Guyanese, and it is a division shorn of memory.

In interviews we have done so far, retellings detail collective terror (the bombing of a launch on the Demerara river at Hurudaia, killing 43 African women, men and children, or the brutal assaults that led an entire Indian community to flee the mining town of Linden) as well as individual horror (an Indian child forced at gunpoint to kill his African foster mother who had cared for him since he was a child, or a family barely escaping with their lives from a predominantly African community they had resided in for years because the man’s wife was Indian). Inter-racial violence was a productive act, by which I mean to say it was required to obliterate anything that contradicted the sense of African and Indian Guyanese as irrevocably different and separate. In one telling scene in Grace Nichol’s novel, a dougla – someone of Black and Indian heritage – is attacked in the streets of Georgetown by two young men determined to “beat the coolie out ah yuh dougla rass” (Nichols, 1986, p. 139).

This eruption of violence in the midst of dense networks of interdependence is not an unfamiliar theme when put in the context of political crises and their legacies elsewhere in the post-colonial Caribbean. The narrator in *Paint the Town Red*, Brian Meeks' fictional account of the political violence in 1980 that claimed some 800 lives in Jamaica, observes that "so many webs had been intricately woven only to be casually torn apart" (Meeks, 2003, p. 10). In *Tout Moun ka Pléwé (Everybody Bawling)*, Merle Collins says of events leading up to the collapse of the Grenadian Revolution "...brother quarreling with sister, with mother, friend quarreling with friend, with father, country divided like we might think it was never divided before. Nobody say the word, not out loud in public, but was Civil War that creep up and establish itself. And that is why it so hard to heal" (Collins, 2007, p. 13). And in Haiti, fratricidal violence continues to claim lives on a daily basis, even as the mainstream media would have us believe that the removal of Aristide orchestrated by the Canadians, French and Americans in 2004, making a mockery of the 200th anniversary of Haitian independence, has brought peace and stability to the country.

These intimacies make the violence somehow more unspeakable, perhaps because it is difficult to comprehend how the distance between neighbour and stranger could be so easy to traverse, how neighbours could become others in the blink of an eye. They also raise the issue of how women were affected. Most feminist work on violence in the Caribbean (in addition to organizing around the structural violence of adjustment programmes and their impact on women as domestic shock absorbers) has tended to revolve around domestic violence, offering, as Tracy Robinson (n.d.) observes, an important and in many ways straightforward platform around which women could readily

mobilise. We have not paid enough attention to the gendering of political crises and violence across the region, with the exception of Haiti, where we have Beverly Bell's (2001) collection of testimonies from survivors and witnesses, not victims (this is no semantic distinction), gathered shortly after the restoration of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1994, as well as Human Rights and other reports that have clearly established how sexual assault is extensively used as a political weapon against Haitian women and girls.

In the case of Guyana, both in the scholarly literature as well as in popular discourse, there has been virtually no discussion of how women and men differentially experienced the racial disturbances of 1964. Part of this, of course, has to do with a conceptual/political frame that does not foreground questions of gender, but it should be key, given that whole communities and families were reconfigured. One of the issues we must contend with is whether and how women were sexually assaulted because this was construed as an attack on the communities with which they are identified, as well as a direct affront to the masculinity of those presumed to protect them from harm. Silence and denial, however, can also be shame's legacy. It can be difficult to find out or talk about sexualized inter-racial assaults because it is the woman whose reputation is at stake, even (or especially) more than 40 years following the horrific events of 1964. The pressure to be silent comes from within and without. Merle Collins' poem *Shame Bush* captures this poignantly '...touch shame bush/ see how it curl inside itself/ Watch shame bush/ see how it close to defend itself/ Study shame bush, if you really do that reading/ you will understand the silence people keeping' (see Scott, 2007).

Silence, however, is not akin to forgetting. There is no wiping of the slate clean here. In the absence of a ritual cleansing, the events and their diffuse aftermath can be neither legislated nor wished away. As Collins reminds us, ‘Dust don’t disappear when you sweep it behind bed/ People stay quiet but all the questions in their head/ Is true time could heal and bad times could change people mind/ But we have to figure how to talk, leave the hurt behind/’ (Merle Collins, *Shame Bush*). There have been recent discussions of how to break the awful grip of a deafening silence, or when it is occasionally interrupted, of renderings of the past that intensify internecine resentments and divides. Brian Meeks (2007) calls for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in relation to the political battles between the PNP and JLP in Jamaica in 1980 which primarily took the lives of poor people in urban garrison communities, but if we look at the examples of Grenada (where a TRC was established in 2001, see Scott 2007) and Haiti (where a National Truth and Justice Commission was set up in December 1994), we see that these commissions have, for different reasons, resolved little.

How, then, to inaugurate a necessary conversation? For visionary poet Martin Carter, forgetting is an impossibility, but remembering is not straightforward and can be harnessed to new beginnings or dangerous ends: ‘It remains possible to glimpse morning/ Before the sun;/ possible to see too early/ Where sunset might stain anticipated/ Night. So sudden, and so hurting/ Is the bitten tongue of memory’ (Martin Carter, *In the When Time*, 1977). In the case of Guyana, if domestic violence was an issue around which women could easily organise, here we are confronted with the ways in which women identify as members of ethnic communities, deeply invested in narrative frames filtered through the contemporary racial impasse such that ‘the other side’ is always the

aggressor. There is no automatic solidarity – if ever there was – of women *qua* women here in the face of violence. Not surprisingly, this is in keeping with the position of the two main political parties implicated in the 1964 events, with their exclusive roll call of martyrs, and where the only thing they share is a tiresome investment in victimhood that would place the blame entirely on the other. In a region that has experienced Amerindian exploitation, slavery and indentureship, how is it that we have acquiesced so willingly to this ownership and division of the dead by an opportunistic political class?

I remember when I was a child, my father told me that in his trips to the interior, he had learned from Amerindian communities that quite often the antidote to a poisonous plant would be growing right next to it. You just had to know where to look. In the interviews we have done so far, and without exception, next to each story of tragic separation there have been glimpses of something else: the intense fear felt on both sides of the created divide; individual accounts of cross-racial solidarity; families sheltering families; women sharing news and food with each other as mothers and as caregivers; children refusing to segregate themselves from their playmates; elderly women and men emotionally expressing a desire and longing for the homes they were evicted from, and for the networks of interdependence that were so brutally torn apart more than 40 years ago. In *Whole of a Morning Sky*, women organize an entire yard – predominantly Black residents - in a low-income community to keep vigil following the news that the home of the single Indian family who lives among them will be the site of an arson attack. As one woman notes, “I bet you if men used to bring children into this world, they would have more respect for human life” (Nichols, 1986, p. 139). I read this not as a statement of women’s innate propensity for peace as mothers, but rather as a call for recognition of the

implicitly political and potentially transformative dimensions of the caring work that is the foundation of all our societies, but which is unequally apportioned and not recognized. Along similar lines, and drawing on her research with one community in downtown Kingston, Jamaica, Faye Harrison (1997) suggests that even as political polarization was deepening, from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, one could find efforts by local women and men to draw on woman-centred practices that created safe zones of yard and community, challenged representations of militarized masculinity valorized in gunman culture, and foregrounded the structural violence of poverty and marginalization that framed the lives of grassroots women and men.

These openings raise a number of questions. In the case of Guyana, in 1898 a Royal Commission of Inquiry concluded of Afro- and Indo-Guyanese: “They are totally different people; they do not intermix. That is, of course, one of our great safeties in the colony when there has been any rioting.”ⁱⁱ This assumption of a ready-made difference completely erased the role of the colonial state in organizing and creating divisions among the working population in the interest of maintaining acceptable levels of sugar production in the post-emancipation period. The continuities of colonialist modes of thinking, expressed today in a widespread acceptance that Guyanese are irrevocably racially divided, are deeply troubling. What are the contemporary political stakes of keeping counter-memories submerged? Why is it that some stories are more easily forgotten than others, and who benefits from their continued disappearance? As we see it in *Red Thread*, the challenge for Guyanese (and by extension other parts of the Caribbean that are struggling with their pasts in this way) is to bear witness while recognizing that the victim and the oppressor jostle for space inside each of us. Only when we arrive at a

place where we can properly mourn and recognize those touched by the tragic events of 1964, not as mine or yours, but as *our* collective responsibility, can we hope to defeat the narrowly racist logic that has for the most part resulted in an inability to collectively challenge the ongoing marginalization of the majority of the country's inhabitants.

Anthropologist George Mentore, who has worked for over 25 years with the Wai Wai community in Southern Guyana near the Brazilian border, recently wrote a column for the Guyanese Stabroek newspaper (Stabroek Daily News, August 3, 2007). Reflecting on the growing numbers of homeless people on the streets of the capital city, he observed that homelessness does not exist in Amerindian society because there is no ethic or value that could result in "the distress of loneliness". What he was saying, in effect, was that the answer – he prefers to call it the gift of sociality - to this most visible face of poverty and marginality is already here, awaiting our recognition and acceptance. Migration and political violence, the themes I have addressed tonight, represent two instances in which, through our practices, we have created the stranger at the doorstep and in our midst. We might think that the stranger helps to reinforce a sense of who 'we' are, but if we continue to go down this road, it will not be too long before the stranger takes up permanent residence inside each of us. The Wai Wai offer us a most instructive lesson with which I want to begin to draw tonight's reflections to a close. They show us that there are a few places in the Caribbean where we remain each other's keepers, where there is no homelessness, no loneliness, only the company of neighbours. That is the tentative promise of faith, love and possibility in the midst of a difficult, what many might say is a most impossible situation.

Indian historian Urvashi Butalia (2000) points out that “the exploration of memory can never be separated from the ethics of such an exploration” (p. 289), and notes that “In any such exploration of the past, the aspects we choose to illuminate are determined not only by the present we live in, but the future we wish to work towards” (p. 278). These are never neutral exercises. There is another lesson here, if we are to nurture the capacity among our young people to put together alternative maps of the past that can speak to our present predicament, and generate sovereign and connected futures. That the Wai Wai constitute a group that continues to be made invisible by Guyanese coastal anxieties and preoccupations does not render them insignificant. The fact that *they* are the ones who hold the gift of sociality suggests that it is *we* who need to unlearn particular ways of seeing, and to think of the answers that are present among us, indigenous in the sense that they have been created out of the terrain of multiple histories and struggles and answer to a Caribbean rhythm. It is not only to believe that there is always something that can be done, but that we must begin by looking to see what people are already doing. This is the ongoing work that exists, but which remains largely invisible and under-valued. Undoing this is key, and has implications for how we might see ourselves in relation to others, and define our political goals. For instance, as a tertiary educated professional woman holding both Guyanese and Canadian citizenship, I can move pretty freely throughout the Caribbean. Most women, however, cannot take travel so easily for granted, despite the fact that they have consistently and against the odds knitted the region together through their informal cross-border economic activities. How does starting with their lives throw into relief the ways in which class works as privilege and also as a mode of differentiation between women? What does it demand of

me as a feminist, and how might it recast the priorities of something I might want to call a women's organization or women's movement? What does it mean to be accountable and relevant to the present?

Beginning with the lives of grassroots women is, I would contend, a political imperative, and not because one has some romantic notion that this vantage point offers transparent or unmediated access to the real. We saw this most clearly in the second example of political violence, where women identify as members of racialised groups or political parties, in ways that make them complicit with the exclusions and acts of violence that are executed in their name. A couple of points follow from this observation. Firstly, that gender (how we come to an understanding of ourselves as women and men) cannot be divorced from the other relations of race, class, sexuality, nation, ability, age etc., through which we organize and apprehend our lives. Secondly, interdependencies among us do not translate into egalitarian relationships. Thirdly, in an age of neo-liberalism, where freedom has been narrowed to valorize the disconnected individual, it is important to remember that it has been collective struggles (such as the labour riots of the 1930s) that have helped to secure democratic spaces and rights for Caribbean peoples (eg. see Bolland 1995, Reddock 1994). Identifying possibilities that draw on other kinds of popular histories, as I have tried to do this evening, is not enough. It will take ongoing work to name and build on through counter-narratives, memories, and daily practices that invisibly sustain us, to multiply them in order to expand the space of the political into a vision for peace and economic and social justice in the Caribbean and beyond.ⁱⁱⁱ

In his Nobel prize acceptance speech, Derek Walcott (1992) affirms the transformative power of the everyday (ordinary mawnin', as dub poet Jean 'Binta'

Breeze would say), where resides "... the beginnings of poetry, the grace of effort. In the hard mahogany of woodcutters: faces, resinous men, charcoal burners; in a man with a cutlass cradled across his forearm, who stands on the verge with the usual anonymous khaki dog; in the extra clothes he put on this morning, when it was cold when he rose in the thinning dark to go and make his garden in the heights - the heights, the garden, being miles away from his house, but that is where he has his land - not to mention the fishermen, the footmen on trucks..."^{iv} It is a compelling but partial vision, for it ultimately cannot encompass women. Barbadian novelist George Lamming (2004, p. 33) tells us that "...labour and the social relations experienced in the process of labour constitute the foundations of culture...the way we see, the way we hear, our nurtured sense of touch and smell, the whole complex of feelings which we call sensibility, is influenced by the particular features of the landscape which has been humanized by our work..." Women's caring labour has been central to this process, and to the making of what we identify as Caribbean culture today. I want to end, therefore, with a poem by Honor Ford-Smith (1996), *Aux-Leon Women*, written following a Women and Development (WAND) workshop with a squatting community on the backlands of a banana estate in (Walcott's) St. Lucia. This is no feminist invocation of the extraordinary; in fact, in a later poem by Ford-Smith, *A message from Ni* (Nanny, Maroon leader, rebel woman from Jamaica), the idea of the individual heroic female figure, unswerving in her purpose, is dispensed with: "How I prayed to be freed from what drove/ me on: they never mention that, or/ how close courage is to fear./ It was terror of terror that drove me on/ till it was all over and I heard/ I was Ni eye of change/ leadress pathfinder healer of the breach".^v *Aux-Leon Women* was written for a different time, and at one level

can be read as a celebratory evocation of an easy solidarity. Taken today, however, in these uncertain times, and in conjunction with the more faltering, ambivalent and at times stuttering tone of Ni, represented here not as singular leader but more as channel of her community's aspirations, I prefer to read it as offering to a new generation of feminists a lesson in accountable memory. It is a testament to the business of living for women, which maps the circuits of global capitalism, registers the situated inequalities that underpin our lives, and recognizes not just the need for collectivities of practitioners, but the work (this is no romanticized vision), the difficult yet imperative labour it entails to practice engagement, to sustain commitment, to build alliances, to create alternative spaces of hope beyond the narrow and individuated horizons of the neo-liberal present, for a Caribbean that is big enough and compassionate enough to hold all of our differences, all of our desires, all of our dreams. I end tonight with a poem, that anthem to the imagination and archive of memories, for as Toni Morrison reminds us, the difference is not between fact and fiction, but between fact and truth.

Aux Leon Women

Before the sunlight
splits the dry rock
their eyes open
on coarse board walls and
guttered
government
land

Remembering a Future Caribbean

mind set begins

with stumbling over

a sleeping child

an animal immobile.

“catch up the fire/ scrape and grate the cassava/ carry the water
(uphill)/ boil the tea/ the toloma/ beat the castor oil seeds/ wash
clothes/ nurse baby/ soothe old lady/ weed garden/
chop banana/ load banana/ carry it down the stony road/
un cadeau pour Monsieur Geest.”

la lin coowee, coowee

la solei joo baway

(the moon runs

it runs

till the sun

catches it)

“how much are the bananas today”?/ the housewife said
unbuttoning her coat/ laying down her string bag in the
Islington shop/ hurry up there/ don't have all day/ she added
himself will be home soon and the tea not ready/ nothing
changes/ only the prices rise/ Gimme a dozen a them/ bruised
lot you got here today”

la lin coowee, coowee

Remembering a Future Caribbean

la soleil joo baway

(the moon runs

it runs

till the sun

catches it)

scrape/boil/beat

“sleep baby sleep

father working far away

he give me something I take it

he give me nothing.....I take it”

Aux Leon women

This morning

when the sunlight strikes

the rock

Let us sweep that old yard clean.

Let us beat our quarrels into one voice

with the rhythm of the hardwood pestle.

Let us light our fires on this hillside

so all the islands will see

this labour is not free.

Let us burn the sweet wood

for its scent will fill the nostrils

Remembering a Future Caribbean

of the blind and deaf.

listen

(La solei coowee coowee

la lin joo baway)

The stroke of a cutlass in water has no meaning

(La solei coowee coowee

la lin joo baway)

Listen, a song –

a song is beginning

right here

among us.

(Honor Ford-Smith, Aux Leon Women)

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ⁱ See for instance Michelle Stephens (2005).

ⁱⁱ P.P. 1898, L (C. 8656), Royal Commission, Appendix C, Vol. I, evidence of M.J.E. Tinne, 4 January 1897, q. 1082

ⁱⁱⁱ Cecilia Green (2001, p. 68) puts this best: "We need to understand not only the commanding heights of the economy and its hegemonic force but also the nooks, crannies and living networks of the popular and domestic economy and its creative potential. I am not suggesting that with such understanding something magical will occur; politics (and a different kind of politics, in different arenas) has to be built, devised, strategised, organized according to its own logic, not just inferred. However, it is only on the basis of this understanding and the infrastructure it reveals that a politics of empowerment can be sturdily built".

^{iv} For an excellent discussion of traditions of resistance and the reputation-respectability debate in Caribbean cultural studies, and the elaboration of an argument that foregrounds the quiet power of the everyday, see Puri (2003).

^v See Richard Drayton (2004).