

Caribbean Transnationalism as a Gendered Process

by
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Migration is nothing new to the Caribbean, having begun five centuries ago when the region was absorbed into the orbit of global capital accumulation and became a crossroads of population movements. After the genocide of its native peoples in less than a hundred years, for three and a half centuries it was a crucible for blending, although not completely fusing, peoples from Africa, Asia, and Europe. For the past century and a half it has been a net exporter of people, mostly to North America and to a lesser extent to Europe (Palmer, 1995: 9-17). As a whole, the Caribbean exports more of its people than any other region of the world (Deere et al., 1990). Indeed, emigration is undertaken by so many to expand their life choices (Thomas-Hope, 1992: 5) that few Caribbean families have been untouched by the departure of at least one of their members. Migration is also fostered by a shortage of schools that drives pupils to seek schooling elsewhere and by the production of more skilled workers of certain kinds than can be absorbed into the local economy (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 72). In addition, postcolonial Caribbean governments contribute to the transnational traffic by treating migration as a safety valve for surplus labor and by emphasizing capital rather than human resources in their development plans (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 61). These governments are also turning more and more to foreign exchange derived from transmigrant remittances as a strategy to offset, if only partially, the unfavorable balance of payments caused by debt servicing and the high cost of imports in relation to the value of exports (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 68). Moreover, the large civil services left behind by the European colonizers have turned into swollen state bureaucracies that are the principal employers of a large segment of the population, access to jobs being controlled by political patronage. The resulting expenditures for civil servant salaries are enormous and deflect resources from more productive sectors (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 70).

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The ubiquity of emigration and the construction of transnational ways of life are not, however, mere accidents of history but an expression of the relation between transnationalism and global capitalism in the region. While globalization is nothing new and has undergone various metamorphoses since the seventeenth century, dislocating many groups of Caribbean people with each transformation, what is new is a paradigm shift in the worldwide industrial production process (Hilbourne Watson, personal communication, 1997). Beginning in the mid-1970s, the model of accumulation adopted by "late capitalism" has been founded on technological innovation, restructuring, and relocation to cheaper labor markets, the side effects of which are "downsizing," rising unemployment, plummeting wages, and general wage inequality. One consequence of these changes in the spatiotemporal reproduction of the global labor force has been the general undermining of labor power and the "casualization" of labor, converting workers with fixed salaries, relative job security, and fringe benefits into temporary workers with no such privileges (Safa, 1995: 2). In the United States, labor market deregulation reigns supreme, strong unions are a thing of the past, and uniform wage scales, generous unemployment insurance, and costly benefits are almost extinct. In response to North American protectionism and insensitivity to regional particularities, many Caribbean governments, desperate for loans to service already incurred debts, have been forced to adopt structural adjustment plans aimed at reducing public services such as health care and education. Global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund hold the keys to economic development in their role as guarantors of loans and are therefore far from blameless in producing social conflict, greater poverty, and general suffering (Miller, 1997: 35-57). As creditors in the service of the major capitalist powers, their mission is to convert poor countries to pure capitalism by, among other strategies, encouraging the privatization of government enterprises. To this end, their policies are designed by neoclassical economists to achieve a free world market by eliminating all obstacles to the free exchange of currencies and goods, such as protectionism in currency exchange and regulations governing price controls, import duties, and local subsidies (Kearney, 1995: 551; Miller, 1997: 39-45).

Thus, as Caribbean governments respond to the changing structure of global capital, the resulting eroded salaries and declining living standards provoke a mass exodus of all social classes in search of a better life (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 68). However, the impact of global capitalism not only varies from class to class but differs according to gender. For example, in contrast to the Caribbean elite, who tend to migrate as entire families and to settle permanently, working-class women in the Caribbean not only migrate

independently but practice circular migration (Thomas-Hope, 1992: 4) and often pave the way for the eventual migration of others. In this essay I want, first, to locate gender within capitalist relations of production by examining the role of Caribbean women as workers and mothers and as key players in the construction and maintenance of social relationships that cross national boundaries. Second, I want to clarify the linkage between the family and the wider political economy by demonstrating how Caribbean family units are constantly being reshaped by the changing needs of global capitalism. Third, as a complement to political economic analyses of globalization (Watson, 1994), rather than treating Caribbean transmigrants as mere units of labor I want to stress the human dimension of these global processes by identifying the tremendous human costs entailed in transnationalism. Last, I want to make more explicit the relation of transnationalism to global capitalism and the implications of transnationalism for class reproduction and differentiation.

WOMEN IN THE CARIBBEAN AS MOTHERS

The West Indian kinship system has been the object not only of extensive research but of intense debate. Space does not permit me to revisit this decades-long controversy, but a brief excursion into Caribbean kinship is important for understanding Caribbean women as workers because the family is related to the capitalist economic system of which it is a part. Caribbean family structure has been characterized as *matrifocal*. This “mother-centered” dynamic of the domestic group is defined by close emotional ties between mothers and children and the emergence of strongly bonded clusters of female kin, mainly daughters and children of daughters (Smith, 1996: 42-45). *Matrifocality* should not be confused (as often happens) with the female-headedness of households. Rather, it refers to patterns of relationships within the household that have a *matrilateral* bias (Smith, 1996: 45), whether or not a husband-father is present. (Indeed, many mother-centered kinship units are male-headed.) *Matrifocality* exists because Caribbean kinship ideology valorizes the mother-child bond above all others (Smith, 1996: 55). It is not only the most important bond but expected to be the most enduring—a lifelong relationship that results in adult children’s essentially becoming “old-age insurance” for elderly mothers. Another Caribbean cultural ideal is that child care is a collective responsibility rather than the sole obligation of biological parents; whoever is in the best position to accept responsibility for a child does so. In practice, this obligation usually devolves to

groups of female (sometimes fictive) kin. In this way, it is common for children to be shifted between households and live with kin other than their biological parents (Smith, 1996: 53).

Scholars observing brittle conjugal relationships, low frequencies of early legal marriage and its corollary, high illegitimacy rates, and matrifocality and child dispersal have characterized them all as "normlessness" (Smith, 1996: 35). Nuclear household structure, monogamous marriage, and egalitarian conjugal relations being assumed to be universal, the woman-centeredness of widely ramifying networks of extended kin and the lack of monogamy encountered in the Caribbean have been treated as "distorted" forms of nuclear family (Smith, 1996: 54). The fact that most of the world's population does not live in nuclear configurations is evidence that the nuclear family is not necessary for child rearing or the financial support of women and children, and indeed, it has been argued that it is a capitalist construction (Tong, 1989: 67). The nuclear assumption is flawed not only in projecting Eurocentric ideals onto Caribbean society but in obscuring the complex linkages between the family and the wider political economy and the status system based on color (McKenzie, 1993; Powell, 1986; Smith, 1996). Most family studies have been conducted among lower-class families and have attributed their unorthodox structure to poverty. This simplistic explanation fails to account for similar marriage and kinship behavior on the part of the middle and upper classes that suggests shared cultural imperatives.

Specifically, the poverty thesis overlooks the dual-union system practiced by all classes, which is intimately connected to the status system. Institutionalized centuries ago during slavery as a system of concubinage coupled with legal marriage, dual unions were practiced by the ruling class and aspired to as an ideal by other classes. The system, which reserves legal marriage for status equals and nonlegal unions for partners of lower status (Smith, 1996: 59-80), persists today, allowing young upper- and middle-class men to marry women of equal status while simultaneously having "outside" sexual relations with women of lower status and fathering children by them (Powell, 1986: 84-92). In contrast, most lower-class men practice nonlegal unions and refrain from legal marriage until later in life, partly because they lack the financial resources either to fully support their women or to exempt them from work outside the home but mainly because of the sharp separation in both ideology and practice between sexual relations and legal marriage, the latter symbolizing a rise in community status (Smith, 1996: 55, 86). Hence, polygynous tendencies among men of all classes are widespread and accepted by all. Such deviations from the Christian moral code by the upper and middle classes have been conveniently ignored by researchers and policy makers alike, permitting them to blame only the lower class for this "morally

depraved" behavior. It should be obvious, however, that illegitimacy is not a monopoly of the lower class. Nevertheless, problems arise in this fluid mating system with respect to the economic support of women and children, where it remains unclear how the supportive roles of men may be linked to family structure (Smith, 1996: 16).

Clearly, the matrifocal relations described above are not the problem but the *solution* to the problem of the economic support of women and children under the capitalist mode of production in the Caribbean. That matrifocality is not the same thing as matriarchy must also be stressed. As "reluctant matriarchs," Caribbean women are of necessity strong and independent—which is not to be confused with being powerful and dominant (Reddock, 1993: 49). Many a strong Caribbean woman has allowed her man to rule and dominate her (Smith, 1996: 94). Indeed, conjugal roles form the foundation of the complex linkages between the domains of family and work because the family is not merely an economic unit but also an ideological one (Anderson, 1986: 314-320; Reddock, 1993: 49-52). In contrast to the "coupling" ideology and "joint" gender roles normative in nuclear family structure, Caribbean kinship permits, in both ideology and practice, multiple forms of union of which legal marriage is but one. More important, it sanctions "segregated" gender roles in which men and women lead more or less separate lives. Thus, matrifocality implies not only that conjugal unions are less solidary than bonds between mothers and children but that conjugal partners engage in separate spheres of activities both in the home and with kin and friends outside; mates are not expected to provide emotional support or to share in domestic chores, child care, or recreational activities (Smith, 1996: 44, 56).

Unfortunately, the result of this sharp gender cleavage has been the disproportionate burdening of Caribbean women with double workloads and the lack of male support, both emotional and financial. They succeed in juggling their many roles only with assistance from female kin, friends, and neighbors (Ho, 1991; 1993). To understand their situation, an explanation of why patriarchy has not perished under socialism provides a clue. Socialist feminists argue that as long as an ideology of gender inequality persists, gender relations will remain unequal (Tong, 1989: 176). In other words, we cannot understand gender oppression in terms of class oppression alone. This is because patriarchy and capitalism are not Siamese twins but two separate monsters, although they function in partnership to produce both gender and class oppression (Tong, 1989: 177). Put differently, (material) changes in the mode of production may alter the family as an economic unit but do little to change it as an ideological (nonmaterial) one (Tong, 1989: 181). There is no question that women's oppression is founded on their economic dependence on men and men's control over their labor power and other economic

resources as well as their reproductive capability and sexuality (Tong, 1989: 180). Nor is there any doubt that the institution of the nuclear family is the instrument through which domination is exercised. However, as socialist feminists see it, patriarchy, being chiefly an ideological structure, can be destroyed only by nonmaterial means, which is to say by psychocultural revolution (Tong, 1989: 177).

WOMEN IN THE CARIBBEAN AS WORKERS AND AS MOTHERS

The dual roles performed by Caribbean women for centuries as workers and as mothers render fuzzy the Western feminist distinction between the public world of work and the private domain of the home (Anderson, 1986: 293). Caribbean women's participation in the public workplace has been necessitated by capitalist relations of production that have historically denied adequate earning power to a large segment of men, making it unrealistic to expect them to be sole breadwinners. Thus, the historical construction of gender in the Caribbean has generated a structural contradiction. By denying women male financial support and protection, the system also demands of them economic independence and responsibility for their families (Anderson, 1986: 308-312; Green, 1994: 151; Senior, 1991: 104-128). However, because many are unskilled laborers, their wages are often not enough to make ends meet, and this forces them to appeal to men to supplement their incomes (Green, 1994: 154). The end result is that while women strongly aspire to economic independence, they are actually dependent on their men (Anderson, 1986: 319; Senior, 1991: 115). This gender paradox has rendered analysis of women's work difficult. What constitutes work is problematic partly because the income-earning activities of working-class women do not lend themselves easily to measurement and partly because they perform a wide range of economic activities. Imported definitions of work that include as "economically active" only those receiving wages for their labor are not very useful in a region where labor statistics seldom match women's livelihood activities. Such data mask the fact that many women work only intermittently, that their income is extremely low, and that they tend to work in the informal sector, many as "higglers" or vendors of farm produce or other items. Hence, "unrecognized work" such as that in the informal economy, on which many women depend for their livelihood, constitutes an analytical problem because the women performing it are invisible in labor statistics (Reddock, 1993: 55).

Today, capitalism continues to be responsible for the economic predicament in which many Caribbean women find themselves. For instance, with

the shift from agriculture to industry in the post–World War II period, agricultural work for women declined without the development of alternatives for those displaced, forcing most into domestic labor (Green, 1994: 157; Senior, 1991: 119). Domestic work, either in private homes or in the hotel industry, which dates back to the postemancipation period, continues to be a common occupation because more than 88 percent of Caribbean women have no more than primary school education and are therefore not competitive in the job market; only one-third are working full-time, mainly in domestic work, and are paid a minimum wage (Senior, 1991: 125). Because of the lack of livelihood options, others accept low wages and inflexible working hours in assembly plants of export processing industries (EPZs) producing goods solely for export to advanced industrialized countries (Safa, 1995: 1-36; Senior, 1991: 121). There they are often hired for the short term or laid off to help employers escape the costs of fringe benefits (Senior, 1991: 121). Furthermore, women's participation in the labor force is more likely than men's to be affected by changes in domestic situations such as pregnancy, the birth of a baby, and the illness or death of a child-care provider (Anderson, 1986; Senior, 1991). While these female liabilities are not unique to the Caribbean, their impact there is more devastating because so many women are sole breadwinners for their families. Moreover, their lack of education and skills coupled with high unemployment rates ensure that they will remain marginalized as a reserve labor pool (Safa, 1995; Senior, 1991). And as long as Caribbean women merely constitute a labor reserve they will be unable to achieve the economic independence from men that, some feminists argue, women's emancipation requires.

Feminist explanations of the emergence of the private/public dichotomy are helpful in tracing the origins of women's economic dependence on men. Long ago, the extended family/household was the "primitive" seat of production in which an assortment of kin worked together (Tong, 1989: 39-69). In these joint economic activities, the labor of women was as crucial as that of men in reproducing themselves from generation to generation, as a result of which women enjoyed high status despite a division of labor based on sex. Industrial capitalism changed all that by shifting the locus of economic production away from the household into the public workplace. As men's productive activity outside the home became more highly valued than women's reproductive activity and as the work of women (childbearing, child rearing, preserving, cooking, cleaning) came to be regarded as nonproductive, women's status declined accordingly. Actually, women are producers of domestic simple use-values without which the *production of people*, particularly the reproduction of the labor force, would be impossible. In this way, men gained power over women and patriarchy was born. Moreover, in the

early stages of industrial capitalism, working-class women and children also entered the public labor force to serve surplus extraction further. In the absence of socialization of domestic work and child care, however, there was no one left in the household for reproductive activities. Therefore, a bargain was struck between patriarchy and capitalism (the two distinct structures responsible for women's oppression, which intersect only partially). Instead of paying men, women, and children equal wages, capitalism capitulated to patriarchy by granting men a "family wage" sufficient to allow women and children to stay at home (Tong, 1989: 180-181). Ever since then, patriarchal ideology has rested on the material foundation of the family wage, keeping women and children out of the public workplace.

While very insightful, this conception of the trajectory of industrial capitalism, obviously based on the European and Euro-American experience, falls short of explaining Caribbean women's condition as workers and as mothers. This is not to deny the penetration of the region by industrial capitalism. Indeed, it has been argued that Caribbean sugar plantations practiced industrial relations of production centuries before the Industrial Revolution (Mintz, 1985: 48). Nevertheless, the capitalism of plantation slavery and later indenture has been an altogether different experience for Caribbean women. First, the majority of Caribbean men have never been paid a "family wage"; instead, they have been daily confronted with job insecurity, working mostly in low-skill, low-wage jobs. Second, most Caribbean women have not been excluded from the public workplace; rather, they have been forced to work outside the home, also in low-skill, low-wage occupations. Third, they have always been burdened with a double workload, as they have never been exempted from household responsibilities even though domestic work has been at least as devalued for them as it was for their European and Euro-American counterparts.

Therefore, Caribbean women's dilemma has been coercion into the public domain without the socialization of private housework and child care. Recognizing that men are necessary as providers even if they are unable to be sole providers, many Caribbean women strike up liaisons with higher-income/higher-status men to supplement their own incomes (Barrow, 1986: 132; McKenzie, 1993: 84). Because they are seldom economically self-sufficient, their solution has been to manipulate their way around the capitalist system by appealing for support from a wide range of men in various statuses (e.g., lover, son, and sometimes husband) rather than relying on a single source of income that may be subject to the vagaries of an unstable economy (Barrow, 1986: 156-170). This strategy is indispensable to survival, given that men have multiple claims on their resources—in order of cultural importance, from their mothers, their legal wives, their common-law wives,

mothers of their children with whom they have visiting relationships, and last, their current lovers (Smith, 1996: 94). In sum, Caribbean women's performance of their dual roles as workers and as mothers, while ensuring their survival and that of their children (Matthei, 1996: 44), challenges the reasoning of those who argue that labor force participation brings about gender equality.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE "WOMAN QUESTION" IN THE CARIBBEAN

Of the numerous consequences of global economic restructuring, perhaps the most profound for family life and conjugal relations has been the increased participation of women in the worldwide labor force, giving rise to the heated debate about whether participation in the labor force has enhanced the general status of women. The reasons for women's paid employment are many, chief among them being the greater unemployment, underemployment, and declining wages of men that make it necessary for women to be either substitute or supplementary wage earners. However, the "feminization" of the labor force has only been in the low-wage, low-skill sectors (Watson, personal communication, 1997), and it is not the result of forced displacement of high-wage, high-skill men. Rather, the level of skills and cost of social reproduction make it more profitable for capitalism to redefine certain types of assembly work as women's work (Watson, personal communication, 1997). Thus, the argument that wage work reduces female dependence on men, increasing their autonomy and decision-making power and raising their consciousness of gender subordination, seems misguided. Safa (1995: 4) points out that paid employment has restricted most women to menial, poorly paid work that does not free them from a "double day" or from the dominant ideology that they are merely supplementary wage earners.

Indeed, Safa's (1995) comparative study of female workers in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, which examines the impact of industrialization on gender relations in the household, is particularly instructive. In Puerto Rico, the early stages of Operation Bootstrap (late 1940s) displaced men from agriculture while employing women in labor-intensive industries such as food processing and apparel assembly. An attempt in the mid-1960s to emphasize capital-intensive industries such as petrochemicals, designed to provide jobs for Puerto Rican men, failed to generate enough jobs to relieve their high rates of unemployment, particularly after the collapse of petrochemicals during the oil crisis of the 1970s. As a result, working-class Puerto Rican men, displaced from the formal sector, migrated in great

numbers to the United States. A high-tech and high-finance phase began in the 1970s as the garment industry virtually disappeared, having moved in search of cheaper labor to places such as the Dominican Republic, forcing working-class Puerto Rican women to subsist on lowered wages supplemented by welfare payments. Furthermore, Puerto Rican women have encountered a state policy of co-opting labor unions in their struggle for better wages and working conditions. Thus, export processing in Puerto Rico has not only favored female workers but made it necessary for women to take on wage work because of declining wages and unemployment among men.

For its part, the Dominican Republic has extended an open invitation to offshore companies to establish export processing zones in response to the collapse of its sugar industry and import-substitution industries in the mid-1980s. The switch from import substitution to export manufacturing, then, symbolizes even greater U.S. hegemony over Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in which the two countries serve merely as sources of cheap labor for American light industry and the role of the state is reduced to keeping the country safe for foreign investment by controlling wages and labor. Not having access to welfare benefits, Dominican men displaced from agriculture have turned to self-employment in the informal sector and/or migration to the United States. In turn, Dominican women have been forced to work in the free-trade zones for extremely low wages (lower than those in Puerto Rico) under dangerous conditions, and attempts to organize collectively in the form of labor unions have met with strong political repression. Their employment rate having quadrupled to 38 percent in 1990 without corresponding declines in male unemployment, Dominican women have become major contributors to household income, some being household heads. Thus, the Puerto Rican pattern of male economic marginalization has been duplicated in the Dominican Republic.

As a socialist state committed to programs of social justice and equality, Cuba has implemented a state policy of full employment for men while encouraging the entry of women into the workforce. It has done the most of these three countries to promote gender equality by offering social services such as free education, health care, child care, transportation, and subsidized housing, food, and recreational facilities (Safa, 1995: 170). In addition, its Family Code of 1975 required couples to share in housework, child care, and income earning, women being guaranteed equal pay for equal work. Thus, as Cuban women became better-educated, female participation in the Cuban labor force grew, reaching 35 percent in 1990. Paradoxically, however, the proportion of female-headed households also rose, in this case not because of male unemployment but because of the redistributive policies of the Cuban state, which fostered women's raising children on their own (Safa, 1995: 30).

And, whereas in both the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico female workers are treated as a cheap labor reserve, in Cuba they are not. Nevertheless, in all three countries women are considered supplementary wage earners, and gender discrimination persists in Cuba through occupational segregation that designates men as managers and women as production workers (Safa, 1995: 176).

Thus, the past two decades have witnessed a change in the gender composition of the global labor force brought about by expansion in export-led industrialization that is biased in favor of female workers, who are cheaper, more docile, more tolerant of poor working conditions and low wages, and less likely to unionize. At the same time, the worldwide supply of female labor has increased because of lower fertility, improved education and urbanization, and the economic crisis, which forced more and more women to enter the workforce in response to reduced wages and declining employment among men (Safa, 1995: 169). The new jobs being created for men require a much smaller labor force, and the new knowledge-intensive technology has rendered many of the industrial jobs previously held by men obsolete and redundant (Watson, personal communication, 1997). The productivity of labor has risen to the point of reducing the demand for certain skills, making lower wages, outsourcing, and contingency employment global norms (Watson, personal communication, 1997). These developments have not only forced many men to confront occupational obsolescence but challenged the notion of a male breadwinner capable of supporting several people, and the ideal of a "family wage" has been replaced by the reality of a "two-wage-earner family" (Safa, 1995: 44). The increasing economic marginalization of men has had negative consequences for the Caribbean family, producing not only marital discord but dissolution when men, finding themselves unable to be economic providers, leave home. Conversely, under these circumstances women are also more reluctant to marry (Safa, 1995: 179).

Hence, the question of whether global restructuring has enhanced the condition of women is a complex one not easily answered. Some argue that working for wages reduces women's dependence on men and increases their authority in the household while promoting their consciousness of gender subordination. Others argue that the isolation of women in low-wage, insecure jobs coupled with a persistent gender ideology of women's being supplementary workers results in the burden of a double day of wage work and domestic chores (Safa, 1995: 4). It is hardly a victory for women merely to substitute their earnings for those of their men (Safa, 1995: 5). In short, as women contribute increasingly to the household economy and as the reality of the male breadwinner becomes more and more anachronistic, the domestic division of labor and gender relations in general undergoes change. However,

such economic change does not necessarily produce more egalitarian patterns of gender relations, as gender ideology has lagged behind. Thus, the evidence is contradictory: paid employment for women has both positive and negative consequences. At times it produces greater economic autonomy, but at others it also creates a double work burden. What is clear is that the economic independence of women may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for gender equality either locally or globally. It is not so much a question of whether women are wage earners outside the home as one of whether they control key economic resources such as wages, income, and property (Safa, 1995: 175). In the Caribbean, the new international division of labor has intensified chronic poverty, widespread unemployment, and underemployment. This has forced Caribbean women either to work under more oppressive conditions than ever or to turn to emigration, which has increased steadily since the 1980s (Sutton, 1987: 15-29).

THE HUMAN COSTS OF GENDERED TRANSNATIONALISM

The story of one transnational family¹ illustrates well the gendered process of constructing kin units whose members are dispersed across national boundaries. The existence of Caribbean transnational families has gender implications because the web of connections is constructed mainly by women (Sutton, 1992: 246). Women are the protagonists in the drama of globalizing Caribbean kinship, which requires the active maintenance of circuits of exchange of goods, services, communication, travel, and personnel. This is not a new challenge for Caribbean women, who for centuries have been embedded in large kin-based support networks. Today's transnational structures are merely the postmodern versions of this tradition on a global scale.

Marilyn Price is the third of eight children, five sisters and two brothers. Marilyn left Trinidad at the age of 20, when her eldest sister, who had migrated to New York years before, decided to "send for" their mother, Pearl. Marilyn, who had graduated from secondary school two years earlier, and her youngest sister, Debbie, accompanied their mother, leaving behind three other sisters, two brothers, and their father. Several months later her older brother, Tyrone, also migrated to New York on the urging of their mother, who wanted a man around the house. For several years Marilyn, Pearl, Tyrone, and Debbie shared a household close to where her eldest sister and her husband and three children had settled in New York. Marilyn found a job as a loan officer in a bank, and 12-year-old Debbie started junior high school.

Tyrone was too old to be sponsored by Pearl as her dependent, and so he had to do odd jobs (as a security guard and framing paintings in an art gallery) for three years until he became a legal resident and could train to be a machinist.

Although Marilyn and her siblings encountered Americans in their daily life on the job, in school, and so forth, their social life revolved mainly around Trinidadians but for the first time embraced people from other parts of the Caribbean region. For example, within a month of moving to New York Marilyn met a Jamaican, Ronnie, at a West Indian party. She later married him, and a couple of years after that they had a baby daughter, Gloria. Although Marilyn, Ronnie, and Gloria shared an apartment with Ronnie's mother, she stayed in close touch with Pearl and her siblings, especially when Ronnie, who was in the music industry, became involved with drugs. During this period, she went to Los Angeles to visit a friend she had known since childhood. She loved California and persuaded Ronnie to move there. Meanwhile, Tyrone got his green card after three years in New York and met and fell in love with a Trinidadian woman, Janet. They decided to live together in New Jersey, where he spent their first year together training to be a machinist. At the end of that year they had their first child, Angela. Although still committed to Janet, Tyrone decided in their second year to join the U.S. Army for a year, training to drive a big rig. When he rejoined Janet after he left the army, he decided to move to California (about the same time as Marilyn and Ronnie) because he had never liked the cold or the New York lifestyle and felt that the city was no place to raise a child. Andrew was born in California the following year, and Tyrone and Janet decided to get married.

Although they occupied separate households, Marilyn and Tyrone maintained close ties, moving into adjoining apartments in the same building with their respective mates and children and sharing many resources including child care. Two years later they were joined by their mother (who preferred the milder climate), Debbie (who had graduated from high school, married a Trinidadian, Michael, and was pregnant with their first child), and their sister Sharon, her husband Steve, and their two children. This three-generation extended family found two other apartments in the building where Marilyn and Tyrone lived with their families. Pearl took care of the youngest children while the adults were at work, and Marilyn and her siblings and their mates rotated responsibility for transporting the school-aged children to and from school. They also cooked and ate meals together and shared other resources. This arrangement was particularly beneficial to Marilyn and Debbie when both their marriages ended and they needed emotional and child care support. Several years later Daniel, the brother who had remained in Trinidad, moved to Los Angeles and bought a home for himself, his mother, and his divorced sisters Marilyn and Debbie and their children. At that point Tyrone also

bought a home for himself, Janet, and the two children a few miles away. Although Marilyn and Tyrone no longer lived next door to each other, they continued to have daily contact both face-to-face and on the telephone and continued to cooperate in terms of child care and transportation of children.

Miami has recently been added as another link in the Price network because it is a popular destination for Caribbean migrants. Debbie and Sharon, now also divorced, have both moved to Miami with their children. Their sisters Sheila, Rachel, and Joan migrated to New York a year or so before Marilyn and Tyrone moved to California and, having married and had children, continue to live there. They visit California from time to time and send their children to spend summers there with their cousins and aunts and uncles. Now living in Trinidad are Marilyn's father, Colin, and her brother Daniel, who returned a few years ago to go into business for himself and has married and had children there. All the Prices stay in close touch, mainly by telephone, daily for those in the same city, weekly for those in another city, and monthly for those out of the country. They also travel to Trinidad every few years and have family reunions from time to time, mainly in New York, where there are more of them than elsewhere. There they organize family cookouts involving 25 or more people. Pearl is trying to sell the house Daniel bought her, partly because he has stopped making the mortgage payments but partly because she shuttles back and forth between New York and Los Angeles to spend time with her children and grandchildren and prefers the medical care she receives from a particular Trinidadian doctor in New York. Clearly, the Price family is transnational in scope.

This vignette suggests that Caribbean transnationalism rests on the foundation of the family and the careful cultivation of kinship ties, a global drama in which women play the protagonists. The centrality of the Price women in launching the moves, first to New York from Trinidad and later to Los Angeles and Miami, is apparent. A multilayered tapestry of complex kin networks spanning two countries has enabled the Price family as a whole to exploit resources in many locations, making it less vulnerable to any single national economy and allowing it to triumph over dependency. Sharing an apartment in New York, for example, and renting several apartments in the same building in Los Angeles, eating their meals together, and sharing responsibility for the care of all the Price children facilitated the pooling of the resources of individual Prices. When no single location offered enough in the way of resources to satisfy basic economic needs, as many family links as possible were activated at different times in different places. This can be seen in Pearl's moving from New York to Los Angeles to serve as the caretaker for all the Price children and assist with other household duties. The family strategy of activating multiple links not only built bases in several locations but also

enhanced the symbolic unity of the family. Indeed, it is this flexibility and plasticity, the hallmarks of Caribbean kinship systems for centuries, that allow the Prices to triumph over the contradictions of global capital.

In short, although they may not be conscious of it, Caribbean family units are constantly being reconfigured to suit the changing needs of global capitalism as it continually destroys forms of its own existence (Watson, personal communication, 1997). For instance, children constitute building blocks in transnational social systems. Because they lack child care support in the destination country, the working-class women who migrate from the Caribbean leave children behind (Matthei, 1996: 46). This practice amounts to transplanting overseas the centuries-old custom of child minding, an arrangement whereby children are cared for by female kin or close friends, and it is unsurpassed in providing child care and peace of mind for young mothers who migrate (Ho, 1993: 36). It bears repeating, however, that it is the women who orchestrate the comings and goings of these children. The Price children spend summers alternately in New York and Los Angeles and occasionally in Trinidad. However, as a rule the movement of children is not simply one-way: whereas some young children are left behind, others who have already migrated are sent home to the Caribbean for schooling, where the schools are considered to be of a higher caliber and the children are thought to perform better away from the racial tensions and urban violence of North America. After they finish primary and secondary school they move back to North America or Europe for their higher education. Thus schooling is a bidirectional transnational family project. Put differently, the exchange of children is a form of human currency on both a symbolic and a physical level that cements network relations between distant kin more solidly than other types of reciprocity.

In contrast to the rosy picture of the Price family acting in concert for the well-being of the entire network, according to Henry (1994: 63-73) all is not well in the Promised Land for the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto. Henry reports finding close to 25 percent of households being headed by single parents and few multigenerational matrifocal households, as well as network disintegration with successive generations. While the single-parent finding is by no means a radical departure from patterns observed in the Caribbean, what is problematic about it in Canada is the absence of female extended kin who might provide child care. The inability of women to find child care is a serious problem that has implications for the upward mobility that is the ultimate goal of migration. Without child care, these young single mothers cannot work, except at menial, low-wage jobs, nor can they continue interrupted schooling to improve their skill levels. The end result for them is either chronic poverty or dependence on public assistance.

The greatest toll exacted by Caribbean transnationalism is marriage and relationship breakdown. Within three years of migrating to Toronto, the marriages or relationships of 90 percent of Henry's sample had ended in either separation or divorce (Henry, 1994: 86). According to Henry, the long separations that result from the pattern of women's migrating first, to be reunited with mates and children only after they become settled, have seriously undermined conjugal relationships. Thus, North American immigration policy, in the service of capitalist restructuring, destabilizes and reshapes family units to reproduce needed labor and skills (Watson, personal communication, 1997). Even more destructive of marriages has been "double-lap" migration (moving first to Britain and then to Canada), particularly if the partners have disagreed about the second move. Marriages also collapse under the weight of new pressures encountered in the host society. For one thing, Caribbean women have had far greater access to employment than their male counterparts in Toronto, sometimes accepting menial jobs as domestics and nannies. For another, Caribbean men not only have encountered a job shortage but have been handicapped by their lack of skills and experience. To compound the problem, women continue to have expectations of their men as breadwinners, despite the latter's inability to find work. They are also the ones less likely to return home because their earning power is greater overseas and more flexible gender roles there allow them more personal freedom (Wiltshire, 1992: 184). Changing gender ideology in the new society also contributes to friction between spouses and mates as women begin to adopt the notion of marriage as an equal partnership; no longer tolerating male domination, they become financially independent, often being the main breadwinners (Bonnett, 1990). Few marriages are able to withstand the financial pressures, let alone the ideological shifts.

Another consequence of migration is strained parent-child relationships. As Caribbean mothers assert their authority and make decisions independent of Caribbean fathers, children also challenge their fathers, constantly forcing them to exercise their power (Bonnett, 1990: 143). This intergenerational conflict is often made worse as the children adopt the norms and values of the new society, causing the parents to disagree about how to cope with the problems of their children (Henry, 1994: 91). Furthermore, family dynamics also become strained when children are reunited with their parents after a long separation. Not only are the children still emotionally attached to their grandmothers, aunts, or other caretakers but their parents seem to them complete strangers. Things are particularly strained when children are reunited with one parent who has a new conjugal partner with whom the children do not get along or with stepsiblings whom they regard as rivals (Henry, 1994: 80-84). Indeed, while many of Henry's findings do not appear to be radical

departures from Caribbean patterns past or present, that of intergenerational conflict seems to be a genuinely new development. The grief and suffering resulting from this are poignantly depicted in Cecil Foster's *Sleep On, Beloved* (1995). In this novel a young Jamaican woman moves to Canada under the auspices of a government program providing domestics for the Canadian middle class. Official policy prevents any dependents from migrating with her, so she has to leave her child behind to be cared for by her mother and struggle alone against racism and many other forms of social injustice. After many years she overcomes the bureaucratic obstacles and finally succeeds in bringing her daughter, by then an adolescent, to Canada. Unable to cope with the alienation and racism, the teenage daughter succumbs to peer pressure at school to rebel in a variety of ways, the most innocuous of which is working as a nude dancer in a bar. She also becomes a petty thief and gets into trouble with the law. Unable to cope with her daughter's delinquency in addition to her husband's infidelity and racist pressures at work, the migrant woman suffers a nervous breakdown. This novel articulates eloquently how the political economy of North America destabilizes the family structure of immigrants and how immigration policy, crafted to fulfill labor needs, makes life difficult for the immigrants.²

CONCLUSIONS: THE RECONSTITUTION OF CLASS AND RACE

Given the direction of global capitalist restructuring, the prospects for Caribbean migrants are not bright (Watson, personal communication, 1997). Despite its human costs, however, migration continues unabated because it is, as always, motivated by the desire of individuals and their families to renegotiate their class position. Migration is not merely a matter of geography but one of social mobility. Embedded within transnational family strategies are class projects, the goals of which are to transform advancement in one setting into economic, cultural, and symbolic capital in another (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 87). Indeed, class processes are embedded in the strategies of kin groups reproducing themselves in distant places (Lauria-Perricelli, 1992: 253). However, class mobility is no simple matter. Although collective kin efforts are necessary for individual mobility, transnational strategies do not benefit all equally, and at times they generate tension within kin groups. This tension is often masked by a strong kinship ideology but nevertheless results in class differentiation within families. Transnationalism is of paramount importance for class formation in the home society; the billions of dollars in remittances sent home from abroad foster the growth of a domestic middle

class in ways otherwise unimaginable (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 88). The most profound implication of transnationalism for class reproduction, however, is that while transnational networks may facilitate easy movement along many dimensions (personal, psychological, cultural, social, political, and economic), they militate against serious challenge to postcolonial political systems because they channel energy into individual mobility, undermining class opposition and class-based activism (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 262).

The social construction of race in the host societies also undermines class solidarity and strengthens transnationalism (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 234). Despite their best efforts at bettering their educational credentials and avoiding stigmatized identities, Caribbean migrants face glass ceilings blocking their occupational advancement and racial discrimination in all spheres of life (Henry, 1994: 102-147). Through painful experience, they learn that race is linked to political and economic domination in North America and Europe, where they are classified in both official and folk taxonomies in essentialist racial categories that recognize neither class nor cultural difference. Paradoxically, the social rejection of Caribbean peoples has promoted intense overidentification with the home country to escape underclass categorization (Wiltshire, 1992: 184) and the cultivation of multiple layers of strong transnational connections and loyalties (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994: 234). Hence, migrants persist in retaining stronger Caribbean identities than at home, in part because they lack political and economic security and want to keep their options open but mainly because of a sense of loss, displacement, exile, and alienation resulting from the destabilizing effects of capitalism.

In summary, I have tried to reveal the centrality of gender in the building and maintenance of transnational networks. In underscoring the human dimension of transnational processes, I have also tried to draw attention to some of the costs of transnationalism for human relationships. In addition, I have tried to clarify the link between family and work by looking at Caribbean women as workers and as mothers and the impact of global restructuring on gender relations, particularly conjugal roles. In response to the limitations imposed by global capitalism, Caribbean women have resorted to a family strategy of base building in multiple locations. The meaning of these fluid and dynamic linkages and complex systems of exchange extends beyond material acts of mobility to symbolic acts of resistance. Caribbean transnationalism is at once reaction and resistance to the postcolonial region's peripheral economic position in the world system. As such, it grows and prospers by contesting global hegemonic processes.

NOTES

1. The research on which this story is based was carried out among Afro-Trinidadians in Los Angeles and was based on participant-observation and semistructured interviews to elicit genealogies, information about household membership, marriage/consensual and other types of union, children of their own, children of their mates, children living in the household, children living elsewhere, and child care arrangements. Participants in the research were also questioned about where kin resided, degree of relatedness, type of contact, frequency of contact, and content of exchanges. Funding was provided partly by a grant from the Chancellor's Patent Fund at the University of California, Los Angeles, and partly by a Research and Creative Scholarship grant from the University of South Florida.

2. Many of the Caribbean women who migrated to Canada on their own did so under a government program designed to bring domestic workers to perform household duties in middle-class Canadian homes. They were prohibited from bringing dependents with them until they had achieved landed immigrant status, a process that took many years. Even then, they could afford to send only for their children and not for the adult caretakers of their children (who would not be self-supporting in Canada).

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