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Internationalizing Caribbean Culture

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Island insularity for me runs against the very meaning of the Caribbean which is much larger, fluid and more expansive than it is presented in popular island-nation-state discourses. I find U.S. nativism, especially when expressed by African Americans, just as troubling. We all inhabit a world in which we have very fleeting claims; our existences are transient and infinitesimally small in the grand scheme of the universe.

The originally-proposed and working title for my *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994) was its subtitle *Migrations of the Subject* by which, ironically it is still popularly named and the name I use to refer to it. The press, however, thought that a book with such a title would render a book they were excited about marketing, lost in sociological “migration studies” and so, for a first book, I accepted their arguments which said that it would do better sold if placed along with the then more popular discussions of Black Women. My original titling captured the range of subjectivities and movements between them that the book was addressing through the international dimensions of black woman’s writing. It also sought to expand the definitions of black experience then constrained to U.S. borders. Since then, discourses of migration, transnationalism, diaspora have attained the popularity that presses capitalize on and *Migrations of the Subject*, including Caribbean, African, African American, Black British and Brazilian writers) has maintained a place in any theorizing of black women’s writing as in discourses of migration and sometimes even post-coloniality.

I once wrote a solicited essay for (PMLA, October, 1996) about my theoretical contributions in which I said that I am never more startled than when some casual experience is identified as a demographic reality by those doing political economy or sociology. The work of Saskia Sassen’s *The Global City* (2001) or *Deciphering the Global* (2007), or Patricia Pessar’s *Caribbean Circuits* (1996), for example, provide the data that writers describe experientially. In conversation with a sociologist with whom I have co-written a few essays on the subject and who was beginning work then on Caribbean migration, she offered a clarifying piece of information, that the Caribbean women who migrated to the U.S. in the 1960’s were often in the middle-aged group, the research revealed, and never planned to settle in the United States permanently but saw their presence as helping advance another generation, while they maintained critical connections at home – church, community and family relationships and friendships.

As a daughter of the women of that generation, I am also very conscious of the implications of my various identities, honed in the Caribbean and in the

U.S. Having access to mobility at different junctures in my life, I have lived in Nigeria, London, Brazil. I have returned to live and work in Trinidad as well as an adult. I have experienced the U.S. South, Washington D.C. the nation's capital, Miami, New York, Chicago right across from Lake Michigan, though I have not spent extended time in the West coast. In each of these locations, I have taken some aspects of my Caribbean identity with me, and that identity has consistently overlapped with my black woman identity, my identity as a faculty member in major universities, my community experiences, my experiences as a mother, consumer, and traveler and so on.

Clearly, the range of political positions, identitarian locations that one occupies is informed by a series of concrete experiences. The time and context of entry into the U.S. informs the way one navigates U.S. culture. These can allow full absorption as an option but preferably a range of mobilities in different communities. But I also recognize that continuing to live in the U.S. even as it provides a certain access, also presents a clear loss of possible benefits and commensurate status at home. One witnesses the gains of friends and family doing just as well, sometimes better. And at times, such as the Trayvon Martin case and the acquittal of his killer in 2013, a Caribbean would/should question legitimately the possibilities of racial violence if raising children in the U.S.

I came of age in the U.S. during the Black Power period, a very idealistic time when one had to have credible position on issues of African American rights to full participation in the society they helped create. A number of social advancements were fought for and advanced during that period from which many Caribbeans and other ethnic groups have benefitted. The logic I carried was that one could not (and I still believe cannot) just reap the benefits of African American civil rights struggle but instead one had to actively participate in social transformation. But it does not mean an obliteration of any other identities one would hold, for indeed this was the time when a range of "Third World" cultural forms were becoming part of the steady experience of U.S. African Americans, particularly at the level of popular culture.

At a lecture at Binghamton University a number of years ago, Clayborne Carson who was then working on a book on Martin Luther King, Jr., and was presenting a lecture on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., indicated that Malcolm X, unlike King, was never a member of "the black community." When pressed on this issue by a number of student questioners, his response was that Malcolm X, never participated in "the black church," "joined the black fraternities," or any other identified black community mainstays and markers. This was a shocking assertion to many who saw Malcolm X as one of the most clarifying representations of being African American in the U.S. But Malcolm X also had Caribbean background in the mother line of his family and was formed in part through his African-American father's activism; and both parents

participation by the Garvey movement (Carew, 1994; Marable, 2011) and somehow this gets lost in a formulation such as Carson's and perhaps this is what disqualified Malcolm in his eyes from membership in "the black community" as Carson defined it. The inheritance of this dual identity makes Malcolm X in my view fully Caribbean-American as well. A narrow reading of black identity reveals that there is still, in some eyes, a stereotyped "black community" and not a range of black communities, Afro-Caribbean being one of them.

To be sure, a monolithic black community has tactical political agency for political mobilization but it is rather a series of intersecting black communities which overlap, collide, confront, alter and are altered by, each other and a range of other ethnic communities. One therefore has to be self-actualizing, able to cross over and deal positively with a range of communities, a desirable subject position in contemporary times.

My conscious, political, black subjectivity was honed in Washington D.C. and at Howard University in the mid-seventies, with a generation of politically active black youth. An elegant Trinidadian Stokely Carmichael returned to Howard sometimes to speak to overflowing audiences. Walter Rodney lectured and was challenged by friends of mine on the fine points of Marxism, which they felt he was not engaging fully and on other political positions. Stevie Wonder, Patti la Belle, Earth Wind and Fire performed; Count Ossie and the Mystic Revelations of Rastafari would begin their presentation: "So this is Washington, the belly of the beast!" to loud acclaim from the audience. Bob Marley presented to an overflowing crowd in the RFK Stadium and at the Blues Alley in Georgetown where the smell of ganja hovered over the audience in both places. One had only to breathe then to participate.

After having shared the number one graduating position with one other person and getting admitted to both Columbia University and American University with plans to pursue a career in the diplomatic service, I chose the Masters in International Relations in Washington D.C. because it was the nation's capital. I was the only young twenty-two year old Afro-puffed black girl amidst mid-career diplomats who had already had a tour of diplomatic duty and were fluent in European languages and could speak from experience about some of the issues we were reading. The more exciting Howard University's African Studies Program beckoned and going there was immediately fulfilling. But then there was a clear sense of separation between an African Studies program and an African American Studies Department -- one doing the U.S., the other Africa. My thesis on a Caribbean subject with roots in African oral tradition, brought a variety of faculty from related fields together ended as I had advisors from both units on my thesis committee. Stephen Henderson author of *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973) came to the African Studies program building for the first time for my M.A. thesis defense he admitted. Leon Damas, one of the founders of

negritude, was then an African Studies professor and my primary thesis advisor. It was Damas who instilled in me that anyone doing African or Caribbean Studies is incompletely informed unless he or she is knowledgeable about Brazil.

On Howard's campus I saw routinely people like Sterling Brown, Haki Madhubuti, John O. Killens, Dorothy Porter ran the Moorland-Spingarn Research Library. I sat in on C.L.R. James "Pan Africanism" course routinely on the invitation of a fellow student boyfriend and there I saw Sylvia Wynter for the first time when she visited campus -- a sophisticated black woman scholar in her prime, speaking to James's class at his invitation. Through her I realized the possibility of being a Caribbean woman scholar.

From Leon Damas I heard the stories of encounters with Langston Hughes and life in Paris. I remember seeing once what I thought was a white man who seemed so comfortable with the campus and asked the librarian who was that man who was so often greeted warmly on campus only to be told, "Why that's Sterling Brown!" My African American literature graduate courses were taught by Arthur P. Davis, co-editor of *Cavalcade* (1971) a groundbreaking collection of black writing then the pre-eminent source for African American literature before it became the staple that it is in the academy. Arthur P. knew everything there was to know about every writer in the canon at the time and taught a conversational course, personally familiar with most authors.

Towards the end of my M.A degree in African Studies I was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study African Literature at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. After concerned farewells from my extended family in Brooklyn and friends in D.C. who nonetheless felt vicariously the excitement of my going to Africa, I arrived in the chaos that was the Lagos Airport after a long flight which stopped first in Liberia and then made its way to Nigeria. I was told that someone from the Ministry of Education in Nigeria would meet me. So when I saw a well-dressed, official looking young man waving at me I assumed he was the person. He was not, but was one of the young men who had created employment for themselves facilitating entry into Nigeria, past military officers and into the city. There was no romance of arrival into Africa for the first time for me though I am sure the walk from the plane and into the building should have generated some of those feelings. I absolutely have no memory of any such emotions. So the young man helped me through a chaotic process, and put me in a taxi for a hotel once I got through the crowd in my cute outfit and matching Samsonite luggage and I paid him I learned later handsomely for his services. But it was absolutely worth whatever was paid as I had no idea what else to do.

The next day I headed for the airport for a domestic flight, arrived in Ibadan and took a taxi, with my U.S. assumptions in place, to the campus. I learned later what I did quite casually was an amazing taking of risks and that the Trinidad High Commission should have been informed of my arrival in order to

present the necessary arrival courtesies. So I arrived unescorted after reassuring my anxious family at the JFK airport in New York that the whole process was totally managed. Without planning it, I had performed an act of amazing bravery according to all those who heard how I arrived.

From the start it was an exciting and heady time. It was easy to see and meet African writers like Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka directly and to work with people who were the leaders of the then budding field of African literary criticism as developed by Africans themselves. Ironically, some of these scholars are now professors in American universities. My thesis was a comparative study of mythic references in African and Caribbean novels. Prof. Gerald Moore, author of *The Chosen Tongue: English Writing in the Tropical World* (1969) and other texts of African and Caribbean who flew in from Oxford University to be my external examiner told me, at the end of the exam, that I should focus on Caribbean literature as that was an area which needed more voices. My thought then was that he assumed he could do both but wanted to limit my work to one area so I promptly ignored his advice. Fortunately for me, though, a Caribbean anthropologist named J.D. Elder and someone who had visited my family home in my childhood had come to Nigeria, during my last year there, to do research on the Yoruba antecedents of Caribbean culture and served on my committee and facilitated the kind of work I wanted to do on Caribbean and African literatures and cultures. I accompanied him to several of his field work sites and thereby got a closer study of traditional Yoruba culture from witnessing his process.

Several Caribbean scholars came through Ibadan at different points during my years in grad school – Michael Dash, Keith Warner (who read a draft of my thesis), Richard Joseph, Amon Saba Saakana, Arthur Drayton, Maureen Warner Lewis – several doing field work or attending meetings or as visiting professors or just travelling in Africa. I met Maryse Conde one night in the courtyard of the Faculty Club at one of my professor’s invitation. She was then a young woman with a first novel who offered me the kind of encouragement graduate students crave.

Living in West Africa for three years though allowed a series of interesting journeys. Travels by road to Cotonou, Lome, Accra, Abidjan were exciting opportunities for students in that period. Between the Northern Ghana border with Cote d’Ivoire, travelling once with an African-American woman, her American passport was recognizable; my Trinidad and Tobago passport presented a challenge for border guards who had never seen such a passport or understood where such a place was but who were more curious than hostile. After trying all sorts of explanations with my limited French, I finally started throwing out cultural cues and eventually said: “Bob Marley.” “Ah les Antilles!” was their

response, and excited about seeing someone from a part of the world they had never met before, began calling over colleagues to see and meet us.

African Diaspora Studies for me is not only grounded in the initial African World framing of my Howard University African Studies training but actually part of my “livity,” as Rastafarians would call it or “lived reality” of blackness as defined by Fanon. So doing work on Claudia Jones which emerged in the end as *Left of Karl Marx* (2007) and *Beyond Containment* (2011) developed out of filling my own knowledge gap. As a black scholar of Caribbean origin I felt it necessary to “trace” the Caribbean intellectual tradition which seemed not to include women. Having already begun to focus on Caribbean Women writers for *Out of the Kumbla. Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990), I realized then that there was a general absence of Caribbean women as scholars, as intellectuals, as activists in our normal discussion. Black Women Writers became a popular subject in the 1980’s U.S., and a criticism accompanied the growth of that literature. Caribbean women writers were also part of that literary movement and the questions of canonical absence that were asked of U.S. or European literatures could also be asked of Caribbean literature or African literature and that we did.

I once asked Brian Meeks when he was a visiting professor at Florida International University during my time as director, to conduct one session of the Theory and Methods class which was what we encouraged visiting professors to do in order to expose the students to a range of ideas. In doing so I asked him what the theoretical orientation was that he would be sharing with the class so that we could assign relevant essays for reading. He calmly indicated that he defined his work within the Caribbean radical intellectual tradition – a response which clarified for me my own process and which I continue to try to understand. As I continue to study the Caribbean radical intellectual tradition, I see it as diasporic in orientation, but politically committed to social justice, always. Above all, scholar-activists in this tradition imagined and lived a Caribbean world, international in orientation.