

## **INTRODUCTION: WOMEN AND NATIONAL POLITICAL STRUGGLES IN THE CARIBBEAN**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Kumari Jayawardena's pathbreaking discussion of feminism and nationalism in the Third World, written two and a half decades ago, clearly demonstrated that far from being merely symbolic of, or subject to, patriarchal constructions of nation, women were actively and variously invested in many forms of national political struggle. These can include but are not confined to arenas of struggle such as labour organisation, anti-colonial movements, revolutionary armed struggle and resistance to repressive regimes. This special issue of *MaComère* examines some of these struggles in the twentieth century Caribbean, a period for which studies of women's participation are still relatively sparse despite the importance of the period for the enfranchisement of women as political citizens, the rise of nationalist projects invested in a language of equality and independence, and the birth of radical political experiments in Cuba and Grenada which sought to overthrow the repressive structures of the past. In what ways were women caught up in anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, nationalist and revolutionary struggles in the Caribbean, and what did their participation mean? How do various social relations intersect to shape specific iterations of resistance? Where might women be found in the regional and diasporic networks that inflected various political movements?

### **HISTORIOGRAPHY AND METHODOLOGY: SEARCHING FOR THE INVISIBLE WOMAN<sup>i</sup>**

Notwithstanding the monumental achievements of gender and feminist scholarship, Rhoda Reddock's assertion that 'throughout the world, women have had to re-examine and reinterpret history and often rewrite it in order to make women visible' (Reddock, 63) still remains relevant today. Several of the contributors to this special issue reflect on the silences and absences that confronted them in their search to uncover women's participation in national political struggles. Anne Macpherson, writing on women's role in the struggle for independence in Belize, notes the absence of women from a historiography of Caribbean nationalism that has focused on charismatic male "heroes" to the exclusion of the history of the "crowd". Similarly, Karima Robinson's article on the playwright Enid Chevannes attributes her exclusion from scholarship on Jamaican cultural nationalism to the assumption that the 'primary architects of national identity' were male. Chevannes' work, ambiguous as its message was, demonstrates that women were 'cultural transmitters...of the national collectivity' in a much broader sense than in Nira Yuval-Davis' original formulation (621): not only in the context of family and home, but also as public intellectuals bringing their own interpretation to the articulation of emergent Caribbean national identities.

In reconstructing histories of women's relations to political struggles our contributors also raise questions about methodology, epistemology and the limitations of the archive. Piecing together the lives of three Indo-Guyanese women through their fragmentary appearance in national archives in India, Guyana and the United Kingdom, Nalini Mohabir confronts the 'interpretive challenge' of reconstructing personal stories out of the official and highly selective knowledge produced by the 'national' archive. Her sensitive analysis of the 'shadows lurking in archival margins' points to more than a need to recover suppressed or forgotten women's voices and experiences, but raises 'epistemological and methodological questions of what counts as history, and where and how do we gather it'. Steve Cushion's analysis of working class women's role in militant labour and clandestine struggles against the dictatorship of Batista in 1950s Cuba also calls for a 'comprehensive re-reading of the sources' for evidence of female participation. Challenging assumptions that organised labour is male, Cushion finds clues to women's presence not only in the photographs which accompanied the otherwise gender neutral newspaper reports on the strikes, but also in the gendered language of Spanish. Leah Stewart reads against the grain of colonial documents of the Spanish conquest to find glimpses of an alternative history of indigenous women in spite of the stereotyping narratives in which their histories have been bound. However as Pascale da Souza's essay reminds us, constructing histories from archival fragments carries its risks. Out of a few lines of historical text the figure of the rebel maroon Solitude has been constructed and reconstructed to serve the needs of each interpreter; the life of the individual woman subsumed to the mythologizing imperatives of national and nationalist histories. Solitude's place in this history and the symbolic struggles over women as part of the national collective is all the more complicated given the complex political and historical relationship between France and its Caribbean *départements d'outre mer*. In this regard Leah Stewart's contribution also asks us to reflect on Caribbeanist historiography's complicity with the colonial archive in the wake of decolonization, for, unlike Solitude, here it is not just feminized indigenous passivity, but an unrelenting narrative of indigenous extermination and contemporary absence that is reproduced.

In exploring the writing of women into the histories of national political struggles this special issue also pays tribute to the pioneers of a Caribbean feminist historical tradition developed in the Anglophone Caribbean in parallel with processes of decolonisation and the construction of the independent nation-state. Both Melanie Newton and Barbara Bush pay homage to the inspirational work of Lucille Mathurin Mair, whose studies of Jamaican history shattered the 'maleness' of both colonial and nationalist historiographies. More than inserting women into Jamaican history, Mair developed a complex and radically innovative analysis of the intersections of gender, race and class within Jamaican slave and post-emancipation society that predates the burgeoning of such analyses in a later period. Reflecting on Mair's absence from genealogies of gender and colonial history, Newton reminds us of the structural inequalities in the global production of knowledge that elides the epistemological significance of her contribution to women's and gender history. These inequalities have not only affected what we know about the role of Caribbean women in the national political struggles this special issue seeks to uncover, but also what we know about the Caribbean

women scholars who have uncovered them. As such Mair's work stands as a challenge not only to the canons of nationalist historiographies but also to those of Western feminism.

## **WOMEN IN STRUGGLE**

The essays in this journal issue map women's involvement in a range of actions across multiple terrains, foregrounding the importance of questions of gender to such domains as formal politics (Hoeft), anti-colonial struggles (Macpherson, Friedman, Mohabir), trade union activism (Bolles, Phillips, Cushion), cultural and intellectual production (Robinson, Austin, Bush, Newton), and civil rebellion (Andaiye, Cushion). This is not just a question of adding women to the picture, but of reflecting on what their involvement adds to our understanding of the production of complexly gendered subjects, and how it challenges our discussion not only of what constitutes the space of the political, but equally the spaces in which politics occurs.

An important point raised by several of the articles is that there is much to be gained by thinking of the transnational modalities through which national and postcolonial struggles are forged. Andrea Friedman's contribution on Ruth Reynolds' commitment, as a patriotic anti-imperialist American, to the Puerto Rican independence movement, raises interesting questions about the creation of political identities across national borders, particularly as these relate to navigating issues of racialized and gendered difference. David Austin highlights Barbadian migrant Anne Cools' involvement in the Caribbean Conference Committee (CCC) in 1960s Montreal, a city that played a critical role not only in shaping the pan-Caribbean political imaginaries of migrants but in affecting politics in the region, most notably the Black Power uprising in Trinidad and Tobago in 1970. Nalini Mohabir charts a quieter, perhaps more personal journey of movement for three women who leave Guyana for India and eventually 'return,' a gendered itinerary that asks us to reconsider (in relational terms) questions of affiliation and belonging that extend beyond the Caribbean in an era of decolonization. Moreover, these travels, taking place in the midst of the spectacular collapse of a multi-racial anti-colonial movement in British Guiana, could perhaps also be read as a comment on the terms of exclusion of emergent nationalisms, highlighting the need to unsettle masculinist imaginaries that claimed to speak for everyone.

Indeed, across the essays in this special issue, women's activism occurs in the face of a wider context that insists on defining them in a supportive role, bracketing or altogether indifferent to the gendered inequalities that shape their engagement. It is remarkable to contemplate what women accomplished in the face of such institutional and ideological limits, as in Steve Cushion's essay which shows that notwithstanding the fact that they constituted a small percentage of the organised labour force in Cuba in the 1950s, trade unionised women workers were central to the initiation of industrial action and militant struggles across key sectors of the Cuban economy. It is also important to make the quieter work visible, which we see in Jamaican trade unionist Marva Phillips' recognition of the debt of gratitude owed to Pearl McCatty who served for decades in multiple capacities (office manager, financial secretary, trustee) in the Trades Union Congress of Jamaica. For Phillips (who is herself paid tribute to in a contribution by Lynn Bolles), McCatty was the repository of institutional

memory and organizational core of the TUC as well as a role model for later generations of women, even if her work continues to be misrecognized as supportive.

As several of the essays clearly show, the sites of struggle could and did go well beyond traditional spaces of organizing, in ways that frequently expanded the horizons of political claims. Gendered inequalities generated by the designation of caring work as women's natural responsibility become the basis of women's mobilization at different historical moments and in different places, challenging neat distinctions between the private and public domains and also bringing to the forefront historical actors not typically seen as political subjects. Anne Macpherson refers to this politicization of the domestic as combative motherhood in her discussion of the radical agenda of working-class women activists in 1930s Belize, and points out that their political demands, while emanating from their responsibilities as mothers and housewives, clearly imagined women as workers and citizens in the emerging Belizean nation. Steve Cushion's description of the role of female family members of trade union workers in sustaining strike actions and establishing residence-based women's groups, highlights the need for more research on the effect of this kind of neighbourhood activism in sustaining solidarity across employment sectors, and broadening the scope of demands – beyond traditional union issues – or the ways in which they were framed. As Andaiye points out, 'There is no frontier between home and street,' in her thoughtful and self-critical discussion of the importance of Guyanese working-class housewives, drawn to the streets in response to food shortages and the criminalization of their efforts to feed their families, to the civil rebellion which so clearly revealed the extent of authoritarian rule – and the refusal to succumb to it - in the early 1980s.

The public presence and militancy of Guyanese women offered an opportunity – wholly missed at the time by the organized left – to see these actions not just or even in a supportive capacity to organized labour but in their own right, and specifically to reckon with the radical implications of recognizing housewives as a sector of the working class. Such unfulfilled promises can partly be explained by the relationship between the organizational frames for women's activism and the outcomes of those actions, such as women occupying positions in male-dominated organizations (Phillips, Bolles, Austin, Friedman), or the contradictory effects generated by the harnessing of women's activism and fate to a larger cause (Macpherson), raising necessary questions about the importance of organizational autonomy (Andaiye).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the essays in this special issue illustrate not only the range of women's political actions across several spaces and different organisational forms. They also reveal significant differences in the political content of women's struggles, from the more radical demands to reformist agendas informed by deeply conservative visions. As has long been recognised, "women" do not simply act as women: their identities and actions are informed by their position within other hierarchies such as those of race, class and sexuality. Thus Rosemarijn Hoefte's discussion of pioneering politician Grace Schneiders-Howard reveals how her privileged position within the rigid class and racial structures of colonial Suriname informed her reformist and paternalist political agenda that ultimately supported the colonial regime. So too Anne Macpherson underlines the differences between

the far-reaching demands of working class Afro-Belizean women and their white or coloured middle class counterparts, who preferred a 'reformed colonialism.' Karima Robinson's discussion of the work of Jamaican playwright Enid Chevannes in shaping a politics of gendered black respectability and sexual propriety on the public stage, asks us to consider how efforts to create a space for the inclusion of middle class black women into the Jamaican nation operated in hierarchical relation to their working class counterparts, raising important questions about interrogating the claims and exclusions of feminist politics and organizing in the region (Andaiye). But we also see how women recognised and attempted to challenge the asymmetrical connections through which such differences materialize, such as the explicit effort to engage women across race and class in Belize and Guyana (Macpherson; Andaiye). These aspects of women's struggles must be owned in all their contradictory totality. As the essays in this special issue show, an engagement with women's activism productively recasts understandings of what constitutes the political or the national. But it also urges us not to replace a masculinist imaginary with a feminized (or feminist) universalism. Women's activism offers not just an opportunity to unsettle; it is also a space that should invite critical (and reflexive) interrogation, allowing us to track its investments, desires and, yes, its limits.

## WORKS CITED

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<sup>i</sup> A reference and counterpoint to Michael Craton's famous 1978 publication, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Plantation Life in Jamaica*, (Harvard University Press, 1978).