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INTRODUCTION

This article is a conceptual-historical effort to show the relevance, indeed centrality, of the family to representations of gendered and racialized difference in the Caribbean.¹ While it addresses itself to broader postcolonial feminist and Caribbeanist debates and concerns, it specifically grounds this analytical terrain in Guyana, a country where the racialization of the political process – between Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese – is today deeply embedded in the country's coastal fabric. Most scholarly and popular writings locate the historical "origins" of the conflict between these two groups (a conflict that reduces the country to its coastal limits and marginalizes all racialized "others" and in particular the indigenous, Amerindian populations) to the formal divisions of labor in a colonial plantation economy. I hope to contribute to, and extend, this discussion by showing why and how family comes to matter in the production of racialized differences, and what its consequences are for women.²

1. A much earlier version of the historical section of this paper was presented at the Conference on Slavery and the Atlantic World, Tulane University, New Orleans, 1996. I am grateful to Betty Wood and Sylvia Frey for encouraging me to reflect on these historical questions, and to Prabhu Mohapatra, whose historical work on British Guiana in large part inspired this essay. Andaiye, Kamala Kempadoo, Anne Macpherson, Michelle Murphy, Linda Peake, and the journal reviewers have generously shared their time, comments, and work with me. Thanks especially to Nigel Bolland for pushing me beyond the limits of the Anglophone Caribbean.

2. This essay is part of a broader study of contemporary representations of racialized differences among Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese, the way such differences become reduced to culture, and the effects on women of such discourses. The discussion started here is intended to indicate some of the conceptual and historical points of departure for that project.

I argue that we need to take the family seriously for – at least – two reasons. The first has to do with the terms upon which claims to racialized difference are made. Brackette Williams (1991) demonstrates how the politics of cultural struggle in postcolonial Guyana are partly shaped historically by the “conflation of race, class, and culture” in the production of difference. In this essay, I want to consider how gender figures into colonial constructions of stratified difference, and particularly how ideas of family and kinship become intimately implicated in the production of otherness. Discussions of domesticity are crucial to mapping how differences called cultures are made and imagined to be made in familial (these supposedly intimate) spaces, and the ways in which women come to stand for such differences (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989; Loomba 1998).

This article is concerned with exploring how dimensions of Caribbean scholarship relating to the family might be fruitfully apprehended and extended to engage these issues. This brings us to the second reason for taking the family seriously. Mindie Lazarus-Black (1994:66 n. 25) points out that what is needed is an analysis of the *idea* of the family in the Caribbean, its ideological history. And Raymond T. Smith (1996) notes that the perception of ethnic differences as stable and always discernible in the same way has an academic history. As this paper will show, ideas about the family are intimately connected to ideas about “ethnic”/ “cultural” differences, and the images of different families bequeathed to us by much of the early and some of the later social science literature have helped in no small way to naturalize this connection. In this respect, what is at stake is a reckoning of our accountability as academics and policymakers. To what extent have notions of the family in the Caribbean rehearsed colonial constructions of women’s place, and of cultural differences? How might we fashion research agendas that willfully escape repeating the enduring legacy of our colonial pasts?

The first section of this essay revisits the early scholarly (predominantly sociological and anthropological) output on “the Caribbean family,” focusing on its bounded and ethnocentric conception of domesticity. It then moves on to consider feminist and other critical scholarship that challenged these earlier representations and that asks us to rethink the family in contexts that crisscross the domestic, the local, the national. This work, I suggest, is crucial to our understanding of the ways in which the family produces both affiliation and difference and of the role played by gender in such productions. The remainder of the paper returns to Guyana by way of example: in the final section I historicize the discussion by looking primarily at the shifting representations of the indentured and ex-indentured Indian community to show how the family comes to be domesticated and to be seen as an origin site of cultural difference as expressed through racialized differences among women.

REPRESENTING THE CARIBBEAN FAMILY

Between the 1950s and the early 1970s, Caribbean women appeared in the academic literature primarily within the context of households and families. The bulk of the research concentrated on accounting for the fact that kinship structures in the region tended to depart from the Western nuclear family pattern. Differences between Afro-Caribbeans and Indo-Caribbeans were also established through separate ethnographic accounts, all of which generally agreed on the "facts" at hand. Consensual and nonresidential (visiting) relationships were prevalent among black women, while Indian women tended to enter into earlier, and often arranged, marriages. Afro-Caribbean households were more likely to be headed by a woman. Finally, whereas Indo-Caribbean households appeared to follow a more "typical" pattern premised on the authority of the male head, domestic relations among Afro-Caribbeans tended to revolve around women in their role as mothers.

Although the main features of familial life in the Caribbean were not disputed, there were numerous interpretations: were these survivals from Africa and India; were the "different" family types part of a single stratification system or did they fit into a plural society model of non-overlapping segments, each with its own internal evaluative system; were we simply witnessing the adaptation of family forms, particularly among the poor, to the exigencies of everyday life?³

While the various explanations may have differed in their reasons for the diversity of Caribbean familial life, they shared a common assumption that the domestic sphere was a naturally occurring and irrevocably feminine domain. Thus the bulk of this early work provides us with very little information on women outside their domestic roles (but see Cumper 1956). This was especially obvious in the reputation-respectability paradigm developed by Peter Wilson (1969), which argued that women were the repositories of Eurocentric respectability, manifested through their involvement in the churches, their emphasis on sexual propriety and marriage, and their identification with the household. In contrast, via their participation in male-dominated and public social networks, men attained prominence as part of an alternative value system that expressed an indigenous and oppositional counterculture. To be sure, one should not underestimate the pervasiveness of discourses of respectability in the Caribbean today – although it could be argued that Wilson did not adequately consider how such discourses would also enable the constitution of gendered, classed, *and* racialized differences.⁴

3. For a general overview of these various theoretical positions see Barrow 1996.

4. For an excellent critique of Wilson see Yelvington 1995:163-85.

The point is rather to make explicit the power relations through which such elaborations of meaning are made possible, as well as to recognize that they simply do not capture the myriad domains where women are to be found.

The starting point for researchers and policymakers alike, more explicit in some cases than in others, was that “normal” households necessarily consisted of a husband, wife, and children: Raymond Smith’s early work (1956: 69) posited, for example, that “household groups come into being when a man and a woman enter a conjugal union and set up home together.” The pervasive assumption of compulsory heterosexuality undergirding Caribbean kinship studies has, until fairly recently, resulted in overwhelming silence in the scholarship regarding sexual practices and relationships that did not conform to the dominant model (Alexander 1997; Wekker 1997; Kempadoo 2002).

Moreover, this emphasis on the nuclear family was based on the imposition of external criteria (in this case the supposed universality of the male breadwinner/dependent housewife) that would lead to “the habit of defining the Caribbean in terms of its resistance to the different methodologies summoned to investigate it” (Benítez-Rojo 1996:2). In this regard, the nuclear ideal always hovered in the shadows of discussions surrounding the – predominantly Afro-Caribbean – female-headed household. In this framing, it became symptomatic of lack, named variously as deviant, dis-integrated, denuded, and incomplete. It also paradoxically emblemized excess, in the form of the indefatigable matriarch. In this latter sense, Smith’s notion of matrifocality, derived from his study of an Afro-Guyanese rural community in the 1950s, became detached from its original usage, the centrality of women within the domestic domain in their role as mothers, and frequently (and wrongly) equated with female dominance (see Smith 1956; 1988; 1996).⁵ This apparent prominence of Afro-Caribbean women in the home produced stereotypes in the literature of the strong, independent female and her obverse, the marginal Afro-Caribbean male (Mallett 1993).⁶ Based on this reading, it was a simple step to portray Caribbean societies as matriarchal. Indo-Caribbeans, whose household patterns could more easily be fitted into the dominant model, presented less of a conceptual dilemma. The prevailing image here was of the submissive Indian housewife.

5. With the assumption that women should be homemakers, most efforts to explain the “deviation” of the Caribbean household from the nuclear family model are focused on various aspects of men’s inability to fulfill their breadwinner role: occupational insecurity, access to land, out-migration rates. The fact that women may have been involved in paid work, and the effect of this on household formation and dynamics, was rarely considered or given a central place in explanatory models.

6. The theme of male marginality has seen a revival, in a somewhat different form, emphasizing the victimization of the Afro-Caribbean man and linking this to advances made by women in educational and other sectors (Miller 1991). For discussion of questions of marginality and masculinity see Barriteau 2000 and Chevannes 2001.

One can trace these ideas across place, even in the construction of racialized populations that are not necessarily Caribbean. One obvious example is the Moynihan Report of 1965, which placed much of the blame for poverty among African-Americans in the United States at the doorstep of "disorganized" family life. In the British context, anthropologist Susan Benson has insightfully argued that whereas anthropology "came home" by turning to South Asian populations, sociology more frequently made black British communities the objects of its study. She sees this as relating to the stereotype that "Asians have culture, [black] West Indians have problems," hence a disciplinary and racialized divide between the study of culture and the study of criminality and deviance (Benson 1996). While gender is not the focal point of Benson's analysis, one can make the fairly straightforward connection through the implied assumptions about the "stability" (or lack thereof) of the family and its relationship to intergenerational cultural transmission (or disintegration). The overlaps with the Caribbean are significant. As Daniel Segal (1993) has also shown for Trinidad and Tobago, Indo-Caribbeans are represented in both colonial and anticolonial/nationalist narratives as culturally saturated, while their Afro-Caribbean counterparts are seen as deculturalized (see also Munasinghe 2001). Such discourses continue to resonate today, notwithstanding changes in marital and familial strategies, to the extent even that "actual ethnic distinctions in familial practice have drastically reduced" (Miller 1994:143; Trotz & Peake 2001).⁷

Lest we think that contemporary academic representations are exempt from rehearsing these tropes, a glance at some of the broader feminist literature makes us uncomfortably aware of our own implicatedness. In the field of gender and development, distinctions are frequently made between typical patriarchal households – in Asia and Latin America – and the weaker cohesiveness of the conjugal unit in the Caribbean (Kabeer 1994; MacEwen Scott 1994). Sylvia Chant and Lynne Brydon (1989:23) acknowledge intra-regional difference, but conclude that Indian women occupy "a less independent role than their black counterparts." In this example there is some recognition of the need to trace how specific modalities of power differentiate women across domestic spaces in the Caribbean, but difference itself remains fossilized as separateness, and the notion of submissive Indian women and autonomous black matriarchs remains uncontested.

Additionally, the tendency in some quarters – somewhat romantically, one could argue – to repackage the black matriarch as the symbol of the resilience and survival spirit of African women in the diaspora could be seen to efface the daily struggles shouldered by women and the fact that in the face of harsh realities, many simply and literally do not survive. Drawing on her research among the Saramaka of Suriname to raise questions about

7. For a much earlier conclusion along these same lines, see Jayawardena 1963.

feminist ethnographic representations of menstrual rites, Sally Price (1994: 140) cautions us that

In the very right-headed attempt to redress the biases undeniably introduced into ethnographic reporting by the sexism of earlier anthropologists, we need to exercise special vigilance about the temptingly attractive, and sometimes quite powerful, ideological packages that contribute to the cultural fabric of our own moment.

Undoubtedly, feminists would hardly subscribe to the view of female immorality and irresponsibility that informed, say, the Moynihan Report. Yet what is disturbing is that these ideas sound remarkably consistent across disciplinary boundaries and over time. Dismantling these notions is not simply an intellectual exercise in reflexivity, for they have specific and material implications for the populations they construct, categorize, and pathologize.

For a start, we need to foreground the colonial origins of anthropological and sociological models of the Caribbean family, and the imperatives of governance that these representations served, from colonial times to the present.⁸ Christine Barrow (1996:9) notes that the conclusions of the West India Royal Commission (1938-39), which assessed social and economic conditions in the British colonies, treated family life in the Caribbean as disorganized and inferior. T.S. Simey (1946) is a most direct example of this convergence of policy and scholarship – he was a colonial social welfare officer who authored a study pathologizing familial forms and practices. The task he envisioned was to correct such patterns of behavior. The Mass Marriage Movement in Jamaica in the mid-1940s was one such attempt to redraw the boundaries of acceptable conjugal relationships (Barrow 1996). Anne Macpherson (2003a) has shown how colonial reform in Belize in the 1930s also drew on the belief in “the degeneracy of black female sexuality and motherhood” and saw its project as one of making black women respectable. And while oppositional movements, such as the United Negro Improvement Association in Belize, challenged images of black womanhood as degenerate, they nevertheless continued to endorse Eurocentric ideals of female respectability (Macpherson 2003a).

In our contemporary moment, notions of the male breadwinner and dependent housewife continue to structure the labor market in ways that persistently disadvantage women and underestimate the extent of their contributions and responsibilities. Images of female sexual propriety and heteronormativity frame the positioning of female heads, gay men and women, and prostitutes as threats to the reproduction of the post-colonial Caribbean nation-state (Alexander 1997). In short, it seems fair

8. Thanks to the reviewer who pointed out the need to make this argument more explicit.

to say that hegemonic representations of families (as different, respectable, normal) are central to stratification processes and have contributed to the disempowerment of the vast majority of Caribbean peoples.

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF DOMESTICITY

Starting around the 1970s, feminist and other critiques of the earlier studies have responded to these representations of family life in a number of ways: to argue for the centrality of women in the forging of Caribbean culture; to map kinship and other social networks that necessarily exceed the physical boundaries of the household, the locality, and even the nation-state; to delineate women's engagement in paid and forms of unpaid labor both within and outside the domestic sphere; and to trace women's migratory trajectories and imbrication in transnational networks. Many of the earlier critiques tended to focus on rendering the contributions of women visible, perhaps best crystalized in the Women in the Caribbean Project (WICP) that conducted interviews among thousands of predominantly low-income, Afro-Caribbean women in the Anglophone region between 1979 and 1982. Although restricted to the experiences of a fairly homogeneous sample (in class, "race," and linguistic terms), this work began to name the barriers that women faced in the home and beyond. It raised central questions about assumptions that Caribbean societies were gender-neutral, gender-equal, or matriarchal. It challenged the sanctity of the private-public dichotomy. Finally, it laid the foundation for studies that would take the social relations of gender in the family not as a natural fact but rather as the subject of inquiry.⁹

Such a comprehensive survey has not, to my knowledge, yet been done for the non-English-speaking Caribbean, although Helen Safa (1995) has written a comparative study of export industrialization in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, in which she discusses gender relations in the family, the labor market and the state. For the Francophone Caribbean, Beverly Bell (2001) has recently published narratives of primarily low-income Haitian women across diverse sites. While Bell also articulates the centrality and meaning of family as expressed by the women, one significant difference between this study and the WICP project is the prominence given to the state and state-sponsored violence against women in the former, an important consideration that relates to the concerns of this essay. The question is one of relating these seemingly disconnected private and public domains.

9. The findings of the WICP were published in *Social and Economic Studies* (2 & 3, 1986) as well as a monograph series published by the University of the West Indies. See also Senior 1991.

That is to say, how does one make the conceptual leap over time, across levels of analysis and crisscrossing circuits of power, to demonstrate the relevance of the family as defined by the WICP for example, to the study of family in terms of colonial imperatives. And how does one make this leap to define and regulate the domestic lives of subordinated populations, communities' efforts to forge racialized allegiances that become based in metaphors of kinship, or the postcolonial nation-state, attempting to frame the terms of inclusion/exclusion via an array of kinship metaphors? In an incisive review article that holds great potential for feminist exploration of the relationships between the realms of the family, culture, and processes of nation-building in the Caribbean, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1992) names three themes that mark the encounter between the Caribbean and an anthropology that until relatively recently had shown little interest in a region that was too Western, "all-contact" rather than precontact. The first is *heterogeneity*, which addresses the fact of difference as a starting point for the modern Caribbean, indeed for located feminisms.¹⁰ The second is *historicity*, where he reminds us "that the groupings one tends to take for natural are human creations, changing results of past and ongoing processes" (Trouillot 1992: 33). Trouillot's final point, which has been central to feminist thought in the region, addresses intersecting scales of analysis, by referring us to the *nonbounded* nature of the spaces across which social relations and identities are constituted. Foregrounding the blurring of categories (the public-private being only the most obvious) enables us to envision how the domestic domain gestures towards broader conversations and flows that take place at the intersections of the local, national, regional, and transnational.

Pulling these themes together prompts us to move from thinking about difference as plurality, toward more fundamental considerations of how racialized difference is historically and geographically organized and produced across shifting fields of power, mediated through the constitution of contrasting domestic spaces vis-à-vis hegemonic public domains. For the purposes of this essay, it allows us to pose the following question: How has the family become important, as a site of contention, as a site of resistance and culture-building, and as a site of domesticated difference?

These issues are increasingly being addressed in historical and ethnographic research. Verena Martinez-Alier's (1974) seminal analysis of colonial Cuba, for example, distinctly elucidated how marriage laws based on the doctrine of purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*) were formulated to keep people in their "places," feeding into wider stratification systems based on gender, color, and class. For the Anglophone Caribbean, Smith has

10. This is in contrast to Western feminism, for which the starting point was a claim to universality that turned out to be based on very specific racialized and classed experiences.

elaborated upon the dual marriage system, in which higher-status men tend to marry social equals but maintain extramarital or "illegitimate" liaisons with lower-status women. This system is critical to apprehending the hidden dimensions of families and the ways in which these are constituted by, and constitutive of, broader structures of class, gender, and racial power (Smith 1988, 1996). Raymond Smith's work reveals how "illegitimate" relationships (often construed in scholarly debates as integral to female-headedness and matrifocality), far from being a correlate of poverty, permeate all levels of society. Such informal liaisons were accommodated under both slavery and indentureship. For a start, marriage was a cultural marker of whiteness in the colonial hierarchy – legal marriage was for the most part denied to slaves, while marriages among indentured laborers according to customary Hindu and Muslim rites were not officially recognized. Additionally, upper-status white men – and not women – frequently engaged in extramarital liaisons with lower-status women.¹¹ Bringing such relationships within the ambit of respectability through marriage would have signaled a clear threat to the highly restrictive corridors of power and privilege; thus, only by ensuring that such relationships remained illegitimate could a racialized class structure be maintained.

Today the dual marriage system remains a structuring principle of subordination in class-stratified Caribbean society (Smith 1988, 1996). That working-class families, and Afro-Caribbean families in particular, are decried as exclusively practicing nonlegalized relationships, and that women are the ones labeled as sexually promiscuous, speaks to social power and the ability to define normality while rendering invisible the ways in which such apparently deviant practices are common throughout the Caribbean.¹² The dual marriage system, then, keeps intact what Brackette Williams (1991) refers to as the shadow of Anglo-European hegemony in the postcolonial nation-state: the nuclear family (based on monogamous marriage, female sexual propriety, the housewife and male breadwinner) as a standard to be aspired to and attained as a marker of success and mobility. Implicit in all these models of domesticity, although not centrally discussed, is how women are positioned – and position themselves – vis-à-vis the labor market.

11. For a literary account of the complex power relations involving such sexual encounters from the perspectives of two women – one Indian and one African – on a nineteenth-century Guyanese sugar estate see Dabydeen 1996.

12. Douglass (1992) has examined the ideology and practices of elite families, emphasizing how sentiments like love are socially constructed and shape marriage practices that largely reinforce hierarchical class and gender relationships in Jamaican society. On the other hand, the extent to which such dominant norms can, and have been, challenged has been shown for such countries as Antigua, where understandings and kinship practices among the "common order" eventually found their way into state legislation relating to family law (Lazarus-Black 1994).

In a thought-provoking article, Williams (1996) takes the discussion one step further, by exploring how constructions of the family seep into nationalist discourse and claims on the nation-state in contemporary Guyanese society. Sedimented in practices of domesticity are conceptions of difference, not just between women and men, but importantly among racialized groups and across class divides. For men, this is played out in particular ways, since “the field of masculine gender identity is also the field of racio-ethnic competition” (Williams 1996:154). Men draw on historically-constructed stereotypes (pertaining to the labor market, use of public space, and leisure time, for instance) to evaluate their and other’s actions. Thus African-Guyanese men consider how they “can be good *male-the-providers* without becoming the *whitemen* of the past or the *coolies* of today” (Williams 1996:148). In this context, it is “men [who] struggle to give birth to cultures that will advance to become superior foundations for a nation-state which, it is assumed, will ensure the future of a race” (Williams 1996:154).

This formulation makes an excellent and explicit link between so-called public and private spheres, between the family as homespace and the family as nationspace. It also raises a number of questions. Who are the individuals who actually give birth? How does men’s performance of their gendered and racialized identities rely for their success on the disciplining of “their” women’s bodies, or even on the violation of the bodies of “other” women? How do these performances challenge or re-enact colonial inscriptions of difference? What are women’s investments in this process? I would suggest that it is partly because *women’s* labor and the racialized stereotypes that are used to explain female labor market stratification are relatively absent from the equation, that men seem more preoccupied with the racial reproduction of cultures. Women also actively participate in the consolidation of racialized difference (Peake & Trotz 1999), and while this is played out at one level in the family, the construction of familial structures and responsibilities is inextricably linked to men’s *and* women’s activities beyond what comes to be seen as the domestic.

The remainder of this paper attempts to indicate how we might begin to address these questions, focusing by way of example on shifting colonial representations of women and the family in pre- and postindentureship Guyana. I draw here on Trouillot’s framework in order to historicize and undomesticate the family, and extend Williams’s valuable commentary on the cultural politics of domesticity to consider how the location and representation of *women’s* labor is integrally implicated in the inscription of racialized difference that would come to be peddled as timeless tradition, reproduced in culturally familiar and familial spaces.

HISTORICAL INTERSECTIONS AND THE PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

The abolition of slavery saw efforts by ex-slaves in British Guiana to purchase land that would afford them greater autonomy from the sugar plantations. Villages were established on such a scale that one historian would later write of "the most spectacular village movement in the history of the people of the British Caribbean" (Farley 1954:100). The village movement was potentially disastrous for the plantation system, as it threatened to undermine the monopsony previously enjoyed by planters in the labor market. Accordingly, the government introduced a series of legislative measures designed to halt land sales and cripple the autonomy of the villagers in the management of their own affairs (Adamson 1972; Rodney 1981). The inability to reimpose hegemonic control over the labor force also precipitated the search for substitute sources of labor, from China, Portugal, and India, under indentured contracts. The first group of indentured workers from India was brought to the colony in 1838. Following early interruptions, importation proceeded relatively uninterrupted between 1851 and 1917, with well over 200,000 Indians arriving in British Guiana, bound by contract to work at pre-determined wage levels for a period of five years (Look-Lai 1993:108). Throughout the period of indentureship, there was a marked imbalance in the sex-ratio. Supply-side explanations stressed such factors as the forces of tradition and the reluctance of single women to travel (Mangru 1987). More recent research has examined the pivotal role played by the colonial state in conjunction with planters in creating a highly gendered definition of and demand for "able-bodied" labor (Mohapatra 1995; see Reddock 1985 for Trinidad). On the estates, women ranged from a low of 11.3 percent of the indentured population in 1851 to a high of 61.5 percent in 1858. Significantly, the proportion of women to men was far higher among ex-indentured laborers resident on the estates (Moore 1991).¹³ On the whole, the numbers of women and men did not equalize until the post-1917 years.

One need only look at the historical record to displace contemporary scholarly and popular representations of Indo-Caribbean women as submissive housewives and Afro-Caribbean women as working matriarchs.

13. See also the annual reports of the Immigration Agent-General: *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the Treatment Papers of the Royal Commission of Immigrants in British Guiana 1870-1871* (1871), *Report and Papers of the Royal Commission on the West Indian Sugar Industry* (Norman Commission 1898), *Report of the Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates* (Sanderson Commission 1910), *Report on the Condition of Indian Immigrants in the Four British Colonies (Trinidad, British Guiana & Demerara, Jamaica and Fiji)*, and in *the Dutch Colony of Surinam or Dutch Guiana* (McNeill-Lal Report 1915).

Women who arrived in British Guiana as African slaves and Indian indentured laborers were defined and valued in relation to their productivity as laborers and not as dependent members of a family unit. To give one example from indentureship, in response to a colonial office circular requesting responses to the Immigration Ordinance of 1854, a stipendiary magistrate in Guiana claimed that

the agent at Calcutta ... assured me that the indenturing of the women was a breach of the engagement he entered into with their husbands at Calcutta, for they were distinctly informed that the women would not be compelled to work in Guiana.¹⁴

This provoked a detailed rebuttal by the Acting Government Secretary, who declared that he did not

apprehend there could be much difference whether there was a contract to work, as at present, or only to reside where the husband was located, as the jealousy of the husband would compel the wife's presence in the field, and when there, the inclination of both would lead to the profitable use of her time.¹⁵

If indentured duties and the proprietary "natures" of Indian men could so easily result in the same thing, namely women working in fields, why did the colonial state have to go to the length and expense of securing contracts for women? Perhaps the planters could not rely on what they presumed to be the temperament of Indian men, but there was a more fundamental dynamic at work. Intracommunity – in this case male-female – relations had to be replaced by the institutionalization of a direct contract between estates and individuals. The prevailing logic of the sugar plantations required that the households and familial arrangements of indentured workers be denied any role in decisions concerning the disposal of labor power.

This example suggests how domesticity was a racialized and classed privilege in the Caribbean context. Here we also see how some Western feminist contentions that the family is the principal site of women's oppression have little purchase for Caribbean women of color in the years of unfreedom, where women's and men's struggles for humanity were integrally associated with carving an autonomous space beyond the reach of the plantation and with creating families and communities under extremely hostile conditions.

14. Parliamentary Papers 1859, vol. XX, Session 2, Correspondence between the Colonial Office and the Governors of the West Indian Colonies and the Mauritius, encl. 4 in no. 39, Carbery to Govt. Secty. Walker, 9 January 1858.

15. PP 1859, vol. XX, Session 2, Correspondence, encl. 8 in no. 39, Gardiner Austin to Walker, 19 April 1858.

It is this more nuanced understanding that informs Bridget Brereton's (1999) overview of the shift to wage labor among Afro-Caribbeans in the postemancipation British Caribbean and the familial dynamics that went into decisions regarding who should offer their labor for sale to the estates. Notwithstanding opposition from some planters, the immediate post-slavery period witnessed a withdrawal of many women from estate work. Brereton offers two possible explanations for this trend. Gender inequality in the postemancipation period manifested itself in the differential wages earned among the newly emergent agricultural working class. On the one hand, estate wages were critical for household subsistence, but the budding peasant economy in the region also relied on labor, necessitating a rational economic decision in which those who earned the least – women, children, the aged – tended to retire from the estate first (although women often continued marketing their goods, a tradition that started under slavery and continues to this day). Brereton also asks us to consider how women became centrally involved in the recreation of communities and families, and how this strategy of cultural politics and resistance to planter interference into the private domain tapped into processes of class stratification that would come to define "respectable" women as nonworking.

At any rate, the withdrawal of black women into the home sphere was never complete. In British Guiana, the sabotaging of the village movement led to a massive out-migration of men to the hinterland areas, and women and men to urban centers in search of work (Rodney 1981; Trotz & Peake 2001). That black women have had a continuous presence in the paid workforce, and that they do not see motherhood and employment as incompatible activities, is rooted in these historical conditions of exploitation and resistance. At the same time, such realities did little to shake the view that women were secondary breadwinners and dependent on men, enshrining a normative vision of female morality that continues to permeate all strata of society.

One can also trace linkages between shifts in the experiences of the indentured Indian community and the location and representation of women's labor. As Prabhu Mohapatra (1995) convincingly demonstrates, the sexuality of Indian women was a constant source of anxiety, its control a critical element of the apparatus of colonial management. To be sure, the relative shortage of Indian women, along with the fact that they were earning a wage, provided a basis for some renegotiations of gender relations within the indentured community in Guiana (Mohapatra 1995; Moore 1991). However, the emphasis on female social, economic, and sexual agency should not be overstated. Wage disparities placed clear limits on female economic autonomy. Male violence against women was also very visible and extreme. Between 1859 and 1907, 87 women were reported killed on the estates, while between 1886 to 1890 alone, some thirty-five cases of women chopped with estate implements were reported (Mangru 1987:217).

Official explanations revolved around notions of female propriety to explain both the disproportionate sex-ratio (respectable women did not emigrate from India) and the violence perpetrated against Indian women by Indian men. In colonial explanations of the phenomenon of woman murder, we see an overwhelming obsession with inscribing women's bodies with a racialized sexuality that had to be controlled if the labor force was to be successfully regulated: while men remained wedded to their "traditional cultural" ideas of superiority, it was disreputable and immoral women who became further emboldened under indentureship, who rebelled against their subordination to Indian men, and who ultimately paid for it with their lives.¹⁶ The manner of their rebellion was represented in colonial terms as a display of moral laxity; according to this logic, women could not escape responsibility for their own demise. Mohapatra (1995) argues that such explanations permitted an effacement of the brutality inherent in the system itself. By expunging its role in the production of violence against women, the colonial state was able to project itself as the benevolent protector of the Indian community *from itself*: protecting Indian men from promiscuous Indian women and protecting Indian women from the violent proclivities of Indian men through the enactment of various pieces of legislation, all of which located the principal causes of woman murders in female sexuality.

Indian women's sexuality was also an issue in the matter of sexual relationships between women and overseers. Concern was expressed over the possibility of threats to production – indeed it is only under these circumstance that we are afforded glimpses, and then only briefly, into these practices.¹⁷ Given the sex-ratio disparity and the relative infrequency of interracial relations with other subordinate groups, such arrangements were bound to create disquiet within the indentured community, as Indian men's attempts to retain some degree of cultural autonomy (represented through efforts to institute control over women's sexuality) clashed with managerial assumptions of privileged access to the bodies of Indian women.

An inquiry set up in 1870-71 in the wake of problems on the Leonora estate and the allegations of widespread abuse made by a past magistrate,

16. See for example Kirke (1898) Chapters X and XIII; Archdeacon Josa (1913). To be sure, masculinity was also framed in culturalized and racialized ways: it was Indian men who were constructed as culture-bound and prone to extreme acts of violence (see Mohapatra 1995 for an excellent discussion).

17. Kelly notes that in Fiji, with the exception of some police interventions to put down trouble, knowledge of overseer involvement with women was largely restricted to gossip and did not appear to "permeate the colonial social hierarchy" (Kelly 1991:39). In contrast, the subject of concubinage between white overseers and Indian women appears in at least three official inquiries into the sugar industry in British Guiana, in 1871, 1898, and 1910, although the impression one gets from this material – that it is informally dealt with – remains the same.

admitted that there was evidence to suggest that the existence of "immoral relations" between estate managers and Indian women may have been one of the sources of dissatisfaction. It went on to comment:

when it is remembered that any female above childhood is already the actual wife or partner of [an Indian man], it is evident that no surer way could be found of sowing the seeds of discontent and riot. The husband must be conciliated – he is made a driver; after a time the woman must be got rid of; someone must be found to take charge of her.¹⁸

This quotation is revealing in its objectification of Indian women as dispensable, and the production process, which clearly was not.

Notwithstanding early acknowledgement of the situation, interracial unions and the opposition of the male indentured community appear to have persisted throughout the period of indentureship. In 1896 a disturbance at plantation Non Pareil, which resulted in the fatal shooting of Indian laborers, was sparked by a wage dispute; however, it was common knowledge that the wife of one of the dead workers had been living with the manager (Seecharran 1999:35-37). Two years later Bechu, an indentured laborer, testified before yet another Royal Commission that "[i]t is an open secret that coolie women are in the keeping of overseers ... this is another ground for discontent and sometimes leads to riots, yet immigration agents close their eyes to the matter."¹⁹ In 1910 the Sanderson Commission identified a case which came to the attention of the authorities after a libel action was taken out against a manager who reported that a recently appointed overseer had previously been dismissed for "immoral relations" with an Indian woman.²⁰ The figure of the seductive Indian female was frequently juxtaposed with the defenseless overseers whose crime lay in their naïveté. One witness to the Sanderson Commission of 1910 set up to report on emigration from India stated that "it was all very well to blame the men; they are after all human, and you do not know how oftentimes some of these coolie women take a fancy to an overseer, and simply pester his life out."²¹ Such representations left Indian women responsible for the fact, and therefore the consequences, of such acts, a move that ultimately denied the existence of sexual abuse.

It was only in the closing years of indentureship that the "housewife" would become the dominant motif deployed to describe the place of Indian women as settlers in British Guiana (Mohapatra 1995; Trotz & Peake 2000).

18. PP 1871, vol. XX (C.393), Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the treatment of Immigrants in British Guiana 1870-1871, para. 309.

19. PP 1898, vol. L (C. 8657), Royal Commission, Pt. II, statement of Bechu, no. 158.

20. PP 1898, vol. L (C. 8657), Royal Commission, Pt. II, statement of Bechu, no. 158.

21. PP 1910, vol. XXVII (Cd. 5192) Sanderson Commission on Emigration from India to Crown Colonies and Protectorates, Pt. I, para. 3050.

This accompanied the restructuring of the sugar industry in British Guiana and the labor regime on which production depended. If labor importation was the principal means through which sugar production was guaranteed up to the last decade or so of the nineteenth century, local reproduction of the labor force became a central consideration in the final years of indentureship and thereafter. Access to land off the estates was critical to this new emphasis on settlement. Initial attempts to create "East Indian settlements" through land grants in areas chosen by the government were followed by liberalization of the restrictive land laws originally designed to cripple the nascent black peasantry. However, sugar's survival depended not on the growth of a viable and independent peasant sector, but rather on the creation of family units that would remain tied to waged work on the estates, supplementing both the low earnings of indentureds as well as the irregular returns of the nonresident casual workforce (Potter 1982; Mangru 1993).

The new belief that small plots based on family labor, yet dependent on estate employment, were going to be integral to the future survival of the sugar industry, had significant implications for the position of women. Given colonial perceptions that immigrant Indian women symbolized the antithesis of family life, such a change had to be carefully controlled (Mohapatra 1995). As one commentator put it, "it would be undesirable to abolish female indentures, for they would never learn to work. Having been initiated into work, their husbands may be trusted not to allow them to remain idle" (Comins 1893:37). It is perhaps not inappropriate to see in this argument some remnants of the ideological underpinnings of the "civilizing" effects of the postslavery apprenticeship system. Indian women would learn how to be industrious workers and dutiful wives and mothers, disciplined first by the estate regiment and then by their husbands.

As Mohapatra (1995) has shown, the ideological reconstruction of the household as a private space in which Indian women would be subordinate to their husbands was accompanied by intense regulation of the family by the colonial authorities in the closing years of the nineteenth century, largely through the development of marriage laws that were premised on curbing the sexuality of Indian women and punishing women who deserted the marital home. The new emphasis on Indian women as housewives was not seamless, and immediate female retirement from the workforce was certainly not envisioned by the planters. To be sure, few women could afford *not* to work given prevailing wage levels. Moreover, faced with some women withdrawing from work in the field, just as many black women had done after slavery, some planters went so far as to propose imposing a fine on every husband resident on the estate whose wife did not work, arguing that this would cover the woman's portion of the rent for the house provided by the estate (Shahabuddeen 1983:192). Through the investment of their labor

in waged employment, the domestic unit, and the family plot, Indian women were expected to provide a critical subsidy to male wages.

Yet by the time indentureship came to an end in 1917, the household had clearly begun to assume precedence over estate work for many women. Substantial wage disparities between women and men persisted alongside high levels of female absenteeism from employment and scattered reports that planters were no longer pressuring women to work.²² It is no accident that after 1917, continued discussions on providing incentives for migration to British Guiana identified families, and not individuals, as potential recruits for free settlement. In 1919, a colonization committee was appointed to investigate the question of immigration from India. In 1926, a scheme was proposed by the Indian government that was never taken up owing to the anticipated financial costs for British Guiana (Bisnauth 2000). This new discourse on settlements based on the family did not dislodge the reality of the exploitation of women, but simply shifted the spatial sites through which their subordination would now be mediated. By creating for itself a role as the redemptive agent of Indian womanhood, the colonial state was able to represent the Indian woman's body as a site where the problems generated by indentureship could be located and later, as a surface for inscribing new relations of control through land settlement in the postindentureship period.

An additional consideration relates to the types of contrasts that were being made, both explicitly and implicitly, with other racialized groups and in particular with African women.²³ Once again, wider conditions that impinged on life in British Guiana hardly figured in official explanations of the actions of subordinates. Where they did, as in the case of the ex-slave population, it was in fact the *absence* of the discipline and civilizing effect of the plantation regime that was seen as resulting in their degeneration. Explaining the continued need for indentureship, it was claimed that

The answer is to be found in the astonishing laziness, apathy and improvidence which have grown on the negros since they have been freed from the control which was so essential to their improvement, progress, and to the maintenance of industrious habits. (Comins 1893:5)

For the indentured community, which had arrived into a situation in which the contours of social stratification had already been laid out, the referent was India. This made it possible to talk about Indians – regardless of the diversity

22. See the *Report on the Condition of Indian Immigrants in the Four British Colonies (Trinidad, British Guiana & Demerara, Jamaica and Fiji, and in the Dutch Colony of Surinam or Dutch Guiana)*. McNeill-Lal Report 1915.

23. Smith (1996:5) makes the point that it is important to consider how racialized identities are partly "defined in contrastive relation to each other."

of their backgrounds – and distinguish them from other groups on the ground. It sprang from the colonial state's disavowal of local circumstances as a factor behind the actions of laborers. Any admission to the contrary would not only have cast aspersions on the system of indentureship, but would have required acknowledging that Indian women often resembled African women in their responses to the situations confronting them. Instead, the overwhelming tendency was to locate the origin of behavior in the bazaars of India or even in certain regions. For example northern Indian women were sometimes identified as the greatest troublemakers – as being “bold, chaste and unfaithful” in contrast to the “peaceful and law abiding” southerners (Bronkhurst 1888:144-45).

Distinction was also largely constituted through the racialization of place in British Guiana. After all, indentureship was intended as a response to and replacement for disobedient African labor. The factories were the initial exception, but here it was men and not women who were predominantly employed (Rodney 1981). In 1871, African women normally cleaned out the sugar mills; ten years later, they were being replaced by Indian women (Moore 1970:179). Growing stagnation in the villages led many African women to migrate to the city in search of work, where they constituted the majority of the urban population at the turn of the century (Rodney 1981).

The newly emerging division of labor along racialized lines masked the specific insertion of both groups in the colonial economy (Williams 1991). Differences and the conditions that historically produced them became signifiers of an unchanging ethnic identity. Africans were constituted in colonial discourse as lazy and undisciplined while Indians, although volatile, worked hard and could be relied upon. Settlement schemes for the ex-indentured community were construed in similar terms – small-scale peasant production was increasingly described as entirely natural for Indians and rice-growing as an ancestral skill. Again, this effaced the radically different circumstances that had faced ex-slaves in the post-abolition years. Land distribution among ex-indentureds was now a method of maintaining sugar production at acceptable levels, but it was also a marker of racial differentiation (underpinned by the carving out of separate spaces) consciously manipulated by the state.

At the level of the household, low rates of intermarriage between Africans and Indians were seized upon as evidence of the mutual and natural antipathy that existed between the two groups. By the end of the nineteenth century, and at the point at which the domestication of Indian female labor became a critical strategy, it was the independence of black women compared with the subservience of their Indian counterparts, now projected as immutable cultural essences, which frequently became the explanatory factor behind Indian men seeking partners only from within their community:

The coolie woman is respectful to her husband, and a negro woman will knock him down. A [coolie] woman waits upon him at the table, and a negress sits down with him. 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.²⁴

Here we see most clearly the emergence of the contrasting and ahistorical stereotypes of the submissive Indian housewife and the independent black matriarch (the same images, as I noted earlier, which would be repeated and reified in academic circles). The Indian woman's place was now within the home, her labor reserved for the family plot. The household offered a powerful symbol of racialized sexual difference between Africans and Indians, framed as evidence of irrevocable cultural predispositions. More importantly it provided a way of reducing difference to the domestic space, an attempt to define it as a matter of culture, a "private" conflict purely between subordinates. As has been argued elsewhere,

these stereotypes erased the specificity of the colonial legacy, deflecting attention away from those women who did not "fit" as well as from an examination of how cultural practices around kinship and the family were forged in the crucible of colonial rule and gendered and racialised subordination. (Peake & Trotz 1999:51)

THE DOMESTICATION OF DIFFERENCE: MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS?

This paper, by focusing on shifting colonial discourses, has attempted to offer some examples of how racialized difference comes historically to be refracted through the prism of the domestic; in effect, how family becomes racial ontology. In doing so I have hopefully made a case for denaturalizing and "dedomesticating" the family beyond a narrow focus on gendered and generational hierarchies, a move that reveals what studies of "families" might contribute to our comprehension of "larger" political questions and in particular to the racial impasse that countries like Guyana currently face.

Undoubtedly, there is much to be done to unravel the interlocking sequence of events described above. It is important to trace how women and men in daily life responded to, helped shape, and opposed colonial imperatives and desires (see Mohammed 1994 for a detailed account of gender dynamics among the ex-indentured community in Trinidad and Tobago). For instance, Mohapatra (1995) posits that the legalization of customary Hindu and Muslim marriages in Guiana was a critical point of cultural struggle for the

24. PP 1898, vol. L (C. 8656), Royal Commission, Appendix C, vol. I, evidence of M.J.E. Tinne, 4 January 1897, q. 1082.

Indian population, but did not challenge the notion of “unfaithful wives” and the traces of violence embedded in the original marriage laws.

Some of the questions we need to ask include the following: What were communities’ visions of households/families? How did racialized struggles for self-definition and self-recognition invoke other rhetorics of exclusion – of women, of others within (for instance unmarried women, women who crossed racialized divisions in their personal relationships, lesbian women) and others without (women from other racialized groups)? How did the trade-offs engaged in by women (for example by withdrawing their labor from the estates and investing in the home and family plot) encode the domestic space as specifically feminine, as private, and as the origin site of cultural difference and reproduction? What were the “origin myths” (Macpherson 2003b) of early anticolonial and nationalist struggles in the region, and how did these draw on and contribute to the reification of notions of women and families, women in families, and different women in different families?²⁵ Where can we find the traces of the colonialist rhetoric outlined above in our contemporary moment (at the levels of the state, the community, the family), and what have been the consequences for women?²⁶

Finally, the possibility and optimism of spirit to move beyond these crippling representations and their effects reside in the fact that “real” women are never wholly contained by the categories that are meant to enclose them. While this paper has not addressed the histories and implications of such hybrid or *douglarized* spaces, locating such tensions is crucial for revealing how racialized anxieties become displaced onto women’s bodies (imagined as the vessels for the reproduction of pure boundaries) and thus work to police and regulate women’s sexuality.²⁷ Such tensions, however,

25. There is now an emerging body of scholarship on gendered dimensions of anti-colonial and nationalist struggles in the Anglophone Caribbean (Lewis 2000), Belize and Puerto Rico (Suárez Findlay 1999; Macpherson 2003b), Haiti (Sheller 1997) and the Dominican Republic (Martínez Vergne 2001). Macpherson demonstrates how nineteenth-century political origin myths in Belize, preoccupied with keeping miscegenation outside the boundaries of the legitimate and the acceptable, erased the presence of women of color, enslaved and free, and their links (as mothers) to an emergent creole middle class. Martínez Vergne’s study of early twentieth-century Dominican national discourse reveals the limits of citizenship and belonging, as white elite men represented bourgeois women as dependents charged with the responsibility of reproducing the boundaries of the Dominican nation while dismissing the contributions of non-elite women.

26. For some recent discussions in relation to this question see Niranjana (1997) and Munasinghe (2001).

27. *Dougla* refers to a child of African and Indian parentage; see Segal (1993) for an extensive treatment of miscegenation across these two racialized groups in pre-independence Trinidad and Tobago. For discussions of gender and hybridity in the Caribbean context (Belize and Trinidad), see Niranjana (1997), Puri (1999), Reddock (1999), and Macpherson (2003b).

are also critical for the elaboration of a feminist politics in the Caribbean that explicitly acknowledges the historical damage of thinking of difference in this way, and that harnesses women's specific, overlapping, and often transgressive experiences to an agenda for social justice that does not adhere to the boundaries of "race."

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