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Nothing To Write Home About
Caribbean Canadian Daughters, Mothers and Migration

> These women, our mothers, a whole generation of them, left us. They went to England or America or Canada or some big city as fast as their wit could get them there because they were women and all they had to live on was wit since nobody considered them whole people. (Brand, 1996: 230)

Introduction

Faced with high unemployment and economic instability, Caribbean peoples began mass migrating to the United States, England and Canada in the early 1950s and '60s. Simultaneously, transformations in the post-World War II economies led to changes in the racialized immigration policies, facilitating the passage of Caribbean migrants. Taking advantage of new found opportunities, young Caribbean men and women left their homelands in hopes of finding employment and making a better life for themselves and their families. While several studies have explored the impact of state policies on directing and controlling the flow of migrants to Canada (Bolaria and Li 1988; Calliste 1989), few have examined the impact of these policies on Caribbean-Canadian families. Besides Silvera (1989) and Das Gupta (2000), for example, there are no studies that we are aware of that deal with the effects of migration on Caribbean-Canadian mothers and daughters.

This paper explores the often volatile and contradictory relationships between mothers and daughters separated through migratory circuits between the Caribbean and Canada. Utilizing oral interviews in conjunction with feminist and anti-racist scholarship, we examine the ways in which four women of Caribbean descent conceptualize their post-migratory relationships with their mothers.[1] We argue that racist immigration policies which prevented

Caribbean mothers from migrating with their children, coupled with a lack of preparation for the kind of racism, sexism and alienation the daughters faced in Canada, fostered family breakdown after migration. A couple of points need to be made here: First, our intention is not to reinscribe notions of the "bad mother," but rather, to complicate the migratory experiences of a particular group of women. Second, while we recognize that this group's experience is not generalizable to all Caribbean-Canadian women, we argue that certain commonalties can be deduced from these relationships. Before we pursue our discussion of post-migratory mother/daughter relationships, it is important to provide some context of these relations prior to migration, beginning with a brief overview of mothering in the Caribbean.

An overview of mothering in the Caribbean

Scholars suggest that motherhood in the Caribbean is marked by two key factors: a high representation of female-headed households (Barrow, 1996; Silvera, 1989; Brand, 1993), and a socio-historical link between motherhood and wage labour (Silvera, 1989; Brand, 1993). In the Caribbean, high numbers of single mothers have existed for generations following the systematic dismantling of traditional families that directly resulted from slavery. Matrifocality, extra-residential unions and alternative patterns of parental responsibility are some of the adaptive features of the Caribbean family. In this sense, family patterns in the Caribbean directly challenge the widespread conviction that the nuclear family is natural, universal and essential. For example, residential separation of mother and child occurs frequently within Caribbean family structures. Young children are often entrusted to other relatives in order that the mother can be better equipped to financially support her children (Barrow, 1996; Silvera, 1989).

In addition to female headed-households and "other-mothering" as central features of Caribbean family structures, there is also a strong connection between mothering and wage labour. Although women in the Caribbean have traditionally been socialized for parental and domestic roles, they have also been expected to perform relatively high occupational roles. Social expectations of these women have always included the expectation that they would work to provide for their families. This phenomenon may also in part explain why migration was such a viable and important option for Caribbean women. Many saw the opportunities offered abroad as the chance to provide for their families in a manner that simply was not possible at home. Racist immigration policies did not allow them to bring their children when they migrated. Subsequently, many children were left in the care of family members, primarily grandmothers. Most of the literature seems to conceptualize the phenomenon of other-mothering as a positive adaptive feature of the Caribbean family structures. Based on our interviewees, there is a contradiction to some extent between what the literature suggests, and their own experiences. While the participants did not express any resentment towards the family members who raised them, they

were nonetheless affected by the lack of contact that characterized their relationship with their mothers.

Most of the daughters testify that after migration, their mothers rarely kept in regular contact with them. The daughters themselves speculate that their mother's expectations of Canada and what it had to offer was far from the reality they encountered. It is conceivable that when the mothers of the women in this study decided to migrate, their intentions were not to "abandon" their children, but rather to make enough money and subsequently send for their children. In fact, many Caribbean women, upon migration, were concentrated in minimum, low wage work, making it difficult to send remittances back home, particularly during the early stages (Brand, 1993; Das Gupta, 2000). Furthermore, the alienation, lack of family support, patriarchy, racism and sexism that these women confronted on a daily basis are plausible explanations for limiting contact because there in that sense, there really was nothing to "write home about."

It is impossible to know, without interviewing the mothers themselves, why they did not maintain regular contact with their daughters. From these interviews, however, we can begin to conceptualize how the daughters perceived their mother's reasoning. In listening to the testimonies of these women, it is clear that the seeming disinterest on the part of their mothers was both painful and difficult to understand, especially during childhood. Once their mothers had emigrated from the Caribbean, most remember seeing them only a few times before "being sent" for. In the majority of cases, the time between their mother's migration and reunification with their mothers spanned many years. Because their mothers left them in the care of other family members at such young ages, participants often describe their relationship with their mothers prior to their migration as one of detachment and unfamiliarity. During their mother's occasional visits, for example, the daughters seemed to regard them, at best, as interesting and exciting in the way a stranger or a foreigner might be. Paradoxically, the daughters testified to feelings of anger and resentment, especially when their mothers would attempt to take on a disciplinarian role. The following testimonies offer insight into the often distant, conflictual and explosive nature of these relationships:

"Smells like foreign": mothers and daughters prior to reunification

Claudette Thompson, 33, migrated to Canada in 1981 at the age of 14. Her mother left Jamaica when Claudette was only two years old. Unlike the other participants whose mothers rarely visited, Claudette's mother returned to see her four or five times. Despite these intermittent visits, Claudette's feelings towards her mother were filled with uncertainty. She acknowledges that as a child, her resentment towards her mother was largely influenced by the fact that she was required to interact with—and obey—a woman who had never played a significant role in raising her. In describing her mother's visits, for example,

Claudette's emotions often vacillated between resentment and awe. Thus the "mother-figure," for Claudette, epitomized an unsettling mix of the exotic and the unknown. "I remember those visits with mixed feelings," she states,

> *As a child, I was always excited to see her because she brought foreign things for me. She even smelled like "foreign," you know? Like a fresh, new package of clothes mixed with perfume. That made me happy. What really made me mad, though, was when she wanted to discipline me. When she insisted that I say my prayers, for example. As far as I was concerned my grandparents were the only ones who should discipline me. My mother was, after all, a stranger, someone who dropped in and out every now and then. Even at such a young age, defiance shaped the nature of our relationship.*

Suzette Bennett, 28, immigrated to Canada in 1983 at age the age of eleven. When Suzette was only three months old, her mother immigrated to the United States, leaving her daughter in the care of an elderly woman who, though not biologically related, had played a primary role in raising Suzette's grandfather. While most of the women in this study lived with their mothers immediately after they were brought to Canada, Suzette moved in with her father and stepmother. Suzette's stepmother had adopted Suzette and her sister prior to migration which made the immigration process easier. Furthermore their father was in a better position financially to support the sisters than was her biological mother. Like the other participants, Suzette's interaction with her biological mother was very limited once her mother left for the U.S. Letters, money and food came infrequently, Suzette states. Unlike the other interviewees who were born in the Caribbean, Hope Summers was born in Canada, sent to Jamaica at the age of four and returned to Canada in 1988 at age ten. She too remembers having very limited contact with her mother. She maintains that while her mother never wrote, one of her principal childhood memories involves receiving a Barbie doll from her mother for Christmas one year. Unlike the previous participants, Hope's memories of the visits are tinged by moments of emotional and physical abuse. She recalls:

> *I remember my mother coming once, and this was soon before I migrated. It was just after Hurricane Gilbert struck Jamaica. The thing that stuck in my memory, besides the storm, was when my mother was buying me school supplies for the next year, I think they came up to $300, and she was angry that she had to spend so much. But that's how things were in Jamaica. I was very happy that she had bought those books for me, and I sat with her as she wrote my name in each one. As she was grumbling about how much she had to spend on me, I gently pulled a book from the poke so I could read it. Without warning my mother slapped me and started to beat me so ferociously I nearly wet myself. She never gave me an explanation, but I figured she was mad about the money she had spent on me.*

One of the most poignant testimonies to the pain and isolation these women felt in being in some ways "abandoned" by their biological mothers at such young ages comes from Hope, when she is asked to describe her relationship with her mother prior to migration. Hope's words decry the multifaceted and complex emotions held by these women towards their mothers. For the participants in this study, feelings of resentment and ambiguity were often overshadowed by a real sense of loneliness and a deep longing for their mothers. According to Hope:

> *There was no relationship. I would think about her a lot. My grandmother always had a graduation picture of her on the wall. I would imagine where she was, and I wanted to be with her. I figured that where she was must have been better than where I was. And I wanted to be there with her. I missed her and I wanted my mommy. I was a very lonely child—I wanted to be normal. I idolized her because my grandmother told me stories about her growing up as a child. I just wanted to be in her life.*

Judging from these responses, it is possible to conclude that this early migratory process interfered with the formation of a bond between mothers/ daughters. The fact these daughters were left in the care of other family members at such young ages likely contributed to the unpredictable relations that emerged after reunification. Despite the unpredictable nature of these relationships, there remained, for many of the participants, an expectation that things would dramatically improve once they were reunited with their mothers. These young women had heard the myths about Canada—that, as Suzette maintains, it "was cold, [but] everyone was rich, like in the soaps." Going to "a foreign place" then, held the promise of greater financial, material and emotional security. Above all, there was the belief that they would finally be able to secure a stable relationship with their mothers, and "live happily every after." Although all of the participants testify to having believed as young children that their standard of living would be greater increased once they were reunited with their mothers in Canada, what many found, was that the reality they encountered fell far short of their expectations. Not only did their expectations for an improved relationship with their mothers not come to fruition, but these participants also found themselves in a strange and unfamiliar world, a world where they themselves had suddenly become "the foreign." There was little or no emotional and psychological support for these children, all of who faced sever culture shock and few of whom had been prepared by their mothers with the skills necessary to integrate them into their new society.

Schooling in Canada

One of the primary locales that participants profess to have experienced difficulty, confusion and anxiety was the school system. All of the participants corroborate tales of excessive and brutal disciplinary techniques used in the

Caribbean school system. However, it should be noted that while Canadian schools may not have followed these same methods of discipline, participants profess to having faced other, often more troubling difficulties, including racism and sexism, both subtle and systemic. Hope's expectations of Canada, for example, were largely influenced by her experiences with the school system in Jamaica. She expected things to be much better in the Canadian school system, including a "school system that didn't beat its students." Hope hated school in Jamaica and deeply resented the harsh ways in which students were disciplined.

Immigration to Canada did not make schooling any easier for these young girls who faced a whole new set of difficulties. Corporal punishment was replaced with institutional, systemic and everyday forms of racism, patriarchy and sexism. It is worth noting that in the Caribbean, teachers are held in the highest regard, as parents believe wholeheartedly that teachers have their children's best in mind. Unfortunately, Caribbean parents often believe this of teachers generally without considering the structural and systemic inequalities that exist in the Canadian school system (Hale, 1995; Thornhill, 1984). Therefore, it is not surprising that the girls had such a difficult time adjusting to the education system. For example, several participants discussed the difficulties they encountered as a result of their accents. They were ridiculed, made fun of, and many teachers treated them as inferior. Thus Caribbean students were seen as less intelligent with less potential than the white Canadian students (Frances *et al.*, 2000). According to Hope, most of the Caribbean kids were put back a year or two. Teachers would actually suggest to these children that they were better suited for community college or technical school, or for careers as mechanical labourer, and secretaries than for pursuing academic degrees (Lewis, 1992). Like Hope, Suzette experienced problems in adjusting to the school system. Suzette began internalizing racism to the point where she wished she were apart of the dominant group to alleviate the differential treatment she faced daily. Suzette notes:

> *The school system wanted to put us back a grade even though our grades from Jamaica were good. I was not prepared for an almost all-white school. My speech was made fun of, my braided hair and my scars. I was not selected for any award although I was qualified. I was forced to participate in sports, although I was not particularly interested. Culture shock, the ways of life were quite different which lead me to withdraw and appear shy (totally opposite from my personality in Jamaica). Sometimes I wished I were white so that I wouldn't be treated differently. I started hating my hair, lips and skin color and I also tried harder to "speak English as Canadians."*

Unlike the other participants, Claudette's mother did prepare her to some extent for the realities of life in the Canadian school system. A week before she began school, her mother explained that she would probably be the only black

child in the class. She also spoke to the guidance counsellor that she did not expect her daughter to be streamed. Additionally, Claudette's mother arranged for extra academic help when necessary. Despite the attempts made by her mother to prepare her, Claudette was initially traumatized by the transition from Jamaica to Canada. She states:

> *I hated being here at first. Sometimes I still do. It was cold in a way that made me want to cry. School was especially hard. Almost everyone was white and they seem to talk really fast. I had a strong accent, so I was terrified of speaking in class. At first, I wanted to shrink and disappear. I thought the kids were especially rude and barbaric. They swore and smoked! These are things I would have been immediately expelled for in Jamaica.*

Dawn Green immigrated to Canada in 1974, at the age of three; therefore her relationship with the education system in Canada was different from the other women in this study. She sums up her experience as follows:

> *…Growing up in small town Canada was virtually hassle free. My brothers and sister encountered more racism than I growing up simply because they came from straight from Jamaica into a Canadian school system. They dealt with the name calling and got in their share of fights as youngsters but were able to "win over" their adversaries in a short time. This is I think, was due to constant support of our parents who instilled in us a strong dose of Jamaican pride. So I guess my brothers and sisters paved the way for me, because by the time I started school my family was legendary. We were well liked and well respected, while retaining my "Jamaicaness." Sometimes I think my blackness may have facilitated some of my success, because I initially stood out physically, and then having got their attention, I was able to back it up with either athletic prowess, social skills or intelligence. That was what it was like growing up in Stratford.*

For most of the participants in this study, the immigrant process was one filled with pain, loneliness and isolation. Their experiences, however, are corroborated by the research of scholars such as Dei (1996) and Alladin (1996). Due to the amount of time spent in the education system, schooling loomed largely in reminiscences for these women. School, in a sense, can also become a barometer for judging the larger society. It should be noted that these women's experiences were not limited only to school system as they faced the everyday forms of racism that are so intrinsic to Canadian society; for example, the name calling they endured as children, being followed by store clerks and facing employment discrimination as adults. Drawing on the example of Dawn, it is possible to make the assertion that with additional support in parenting, a politicized sense of the inequalities that existed in Canadian society, along with a stronger mother/daughter bond prior to migration,

integration into Canadian society would have been easier.

Nothing to "write home about": mothers and daughters, post-migration

Coupled with the already disruptive experiences with the school system, the mother/daughter dyad was further strained by the fact that the daughters had very traditional expectations of their mothers even if they did not recognize it at the time. The mothers were simply unable to live up to these ideals. For example, Claudette thought of her mother as:

> ... a well dressed party-girl who drove a nice red shiny car, and who looked like a fashion model. In a lot of ways she wasn't real to me—not the way that my grandmother was. She didn't cook and clean or look after a family like my grandmother had, so in a lot of ways her life seemed strange. The first years of living with her were very, very hard. I'm sure for her too although we never talk about it. I also hated living in an apartment. I felt very restricted and claustrophobic as I had been used to playing outside almost all of the year.

Hope's relationship with her mother was characterized by power struggles and extreme physical and mental abuse which eventually forced Hope to run away at the age of fifteen. She states:

> It was a power relationship with her, her authority was always to be acknowledged. She would beat me for anything. I felt that I was the mother in the house, I was given primary charge in raising my one-year old brother. It was like I was a slave. She knew that I was raised to "honour and obey" and she exploited that. A lot of emotional weight was placed on me and I had to be the strong one for my sister and my brother. I hated my mother, and she made me hate myself and my life. I would go to bed praying that I didn't wake up.

In these cases, it seemed as if the longer the separation between mothers/daughters, the more tenuous the relationships. Dawn who was reunited with her mother at the age of three pointed out that "we didn't face any difficulties until I was a teenager, basically "the rebellious teen thing" that most girls go through with their moms." Although Dawn admitted that the earlier separation between her and her mother might have contributed to their strained relations later on, she states that, for the most part, they got along extremely well.

Tensions between mothers/daughters were also amplified particularly if the mothers had an already established family. At first, Suzette's stepmother appeared "nice and caring, " and she remembered having positive feelings towards her. Suzette notes that after living with her stepmother things soon

began to take a turn for the worse. She notes: "After a few months of living with my stepmother and father, I realized there was favouritism between her children and my sister and myself, who were not her biological children. It was a very tense home environment."

Even though Suzette's stepmother had children which created additional tensions, this is not necessarily unique to a stepmother/daughter relationship. Similar to Suzette, Hope's mother also played the favorite child game. Hope's sister had lived with their mother in Canada while Hope was living in Jamaica, and based on this, Hope was given preferential treatment. "She was jealous of me for living in Jamaica, maybe she felt I was given better things because I was away. When I asked for a Barbie doll, I got one, and she didn't." Hope continued:

> *My mother had favorites. One day my sister would be favorite and the next day I would be. When my sister was the favorite, which was most of the time, my mother would complain to my sister about me. They were in cahoots. As my sister grew older, and teenage trouble started, my mother would more and more confide in me.*

Daughters were also expected to take on traditional domestic and child-rearing responsibilities which were often the purview of the mother. While these daughters may view these practices as unfair, it is also possible that the extra assistance was needed to alleviate some of the pressures the mothers were facing. Most of the daughters concurred that their mothers did work extensively to provide for them. Despite this acknowledgement, their daughters did feel resentment. Hope mentions that in taking care of her brother, she:

> *…was the hired help without the pay. I did everything except buy the diapers with my own money. He took priority over school, over anything I wanted to do with myself. I couldn't do anything or go anywhere with my friends.*

Suzette also questioned the distribution of household work, especially when she felt ignored, unwanted, and taken for granted by her stepmother.

> *We did not communicate much. She didn't take much interest in my life- school or social life. I was given much home responsibilities which I thought was unfair when compared to those of my other siblings. I received little or no encouragement in school or life. There was no motherly affection.*

Conclusion
The women in this study all expected being reunited with their mothers in Canada would bring about certain improvements in their lives. They expected not only to enjoy an improved standard of living, but also to form a closer bond

with their mothers. What they found, however, was that they were, for the most part, estranged from their mothers. In addition, the difficulties they encountered in adjusting to life in Canada were magnified by external factors such as racism, sexism and patriarchy. Their testimonies reveal that their mothers, who most likely did not have any preparation themselves, did not provide their daughters with adequate information or enough support on coping with migrating to a new society. Moreover, some of these girls felt exploited in terms of the amount of work they were expected to do in the family, especially when their mothers did not appear to take an interest in their lives.

It should be noted, however, that although the interviewees did not have ideal relationships with their mothers, at least not according the Eurocentric standards, they did not engage in the same type of "mother-blaming" (Caplan, 2000) typical of North American society. Instead what we see is some understanding regarding the decisions their mothers made. While the daughters do question what they construe as abandonment on the part of their mothers, and their mother's silence when they attempt to address these issues, there is still a real sense of admiration and respect present. Suzette pointed out that she admired her stepmother because she was a hard worker, and had an entrepreneurial sprit.

> *She worked hard. I can't remember her missing a day of work. She was ambitious and business minded. She tried different ventures to make extra money. She opened a small fashion boutique, planned dinner, dances and fashion shows for fundraising purposes.*

As an adult, Claudette is able to critically analyze her childhood experiences and her relationship with her mother as being in large part shaped and defined by the process of migration and state policies on immigration. She notes that:

> *Now that I understand that what my mother went through is part of how colonialism, racism and patriarchy operates I can appreciate the tremendous obstacles she faced and overcame. She is a woman with a great deal of courage and resolve. I admire her determination and her inner strength above all else.*

Anne Oakley (1995) argues that there is "a mismatch between motherhood as a moral ideal and motherhood as a social reality. What mothers are supposed to be is very different from the resources and positions they are allowed to enjoy." Racist immigration policies made it difficult for Caribbean mothers to bring their children with them upon migration, as a result, families estranged from each other for many years face difficulties upon reunification. Taken out of context, Caribbean mothers are then held responsible for the problems their children face. Although the women in this paper were able to

contextualize to a certain degree their mothers' experiences despite the anguish they faced as children, more attention and research is needed to document the experiences of Caribbean mothers and children following migration.

[1]These interviews were conducted in the Spring of 2000 The names of the actual participants were changed to protect their identity.

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