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OUT OF BALANCE? *KONESANS* AND FIRST WORLD
KNOWLEDGES IN CARIBBEAN WOMEN'S STUDIES

We Paid Our Dues: Women Trade Union Leaders of the Caribbean. A. LYNN BOLLES. Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1996. xxxviii + 250 pp. (Paper US\$ 21.95)

Gender: A Caribbean Multi-Disciplinary Perspective. ELSA LEO-RHYNIE, BARBARA BAILEY & CHRISTINE BARROW (eds.). Kingston: Ian Randle, 1997. xix + 358 pp. (Paper n.p.)

Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century. CONSUELO LÓPEZ SPRINGFIELD (ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. xxi + 316 pp. (Cloth US\$ 35.00, Paper US\$ 17.95)

Two weeks before I began writing this review essay, I had the misfortune to contract food poisoning while visiting New York. I was admitted to St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village where I found myself under the capable care of a team of West Indian nurses. At the time, I didn't give this much thought; I was simply happy to be getting good care far from home. The day before I was released, my right arm swelled up from the intravenous drip that had been delivering fluids and antibiotics into my body. It was first noticed by one of the Jamaican nurses, who told me that the IV had "infiltrated" my arm and that, as a result, my "fluids were out of balance," and this was keeping me from getting well. She promptly pointed this out to another nurse, who took out the IV and stuck another one into my left arm.

Reading several of the contributions to *Daughters of Caliban* a few days later, I was led to reflect on the specifically Caribbean theory of body and health in the nurse's explanation for my continued illness. Elisa

Sobo's chapter documents beliefs about maintaining flows of fluids and other substances into and out of the body as central to women's health traditions in rural Jamaica. The body is conceptualized as "an open system that must stay *equalized*" (p. 145, original emphasis). Rather than espousing a germ theory of disease, with its associated metaphors of enemy forces invading a body defended by an army of white blood cells, the Jamaicans Sobo interviewed articulated a theory of disease based on "imbalances" (p. 147).

Yet my Jamaican nurse had also used the medical term "infiltration," a term that recalls the invasion and battle metaphors of modern medicine. Like Alourdes, the priestess and healer who appears in Karen McCarthy Brown's essay in the *Daughters* volume, the nurse hailed from Brooklyn, not rural Jamaica. Brown uses the case of Alourdes to point up the "root metaphors" of Western medicine, chiefly the property metaphor that casts medical knowledge as privileged, owned by specialists, and the power to heal as the possession of pieces of property – "medical implements, drugs, and machines," "diplomas, licenses, and white coats" (p. 123). In contrast, Haitian healers stress *konesans*, or knowledge constituted by open lines of communication with spirits, "heat" associated with balance and imbalance, and the sociality of the relational matrix within which people live their lives and define their personas. As Brown writes, these metaphors cast the power to heal as coming from sources beyond the healer herself. "[I]t is never appropriate to think of the healer as 'having' healing power in the way one can 'have' a piece of property" (p. 134).

Each of these three books on gender in the Caribbean makes contributions by pointing up the cultural politics of caregiving and nurture within which Caribbean women, in the West Indies and in transnational circuits, struggle and build lives. Each challenges "the myth of the West Indian matriarch and the passive Hispanic Caribbean woman," as Consuelo López Springfield puts it in her introduction to *Daughters* (p. xviii). Both myths are built around the Western conceit of "woman" as responsible for the private sphere of family, child-rearing, and health. Yet as Brown, Sobo, and the Jamaican nurse demonstrate, the kinds of care, the boundaries of the private, and the knowledges of women are not neatly separated off from other social forces, powers, or transnational movements – including transnational movements of academic theorizing.

Daughters of Caliban offers an introduction by the editor and thirteen essays, divided into five sections, on the relationship between Caribbean studies and women's studies, women and work, health, law and politics, and popular culture. The volume's coverage of the region is particularly good for a collection of this type, with essays almost evenly divided bet-

ween the Hispanic and Anglophone Caribbean, and one article on language policy in Guadeloupe.

Gender: A Caribbean Multi-Disciplinary Perspective offers twenty-four substantive chapters divided into six sections, with helpful, short introductions by the editors preceding each section. It is the "first publication of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies," established in 1993 out of the Women and Development Studies groups of UWI (p. ix). The sections parallel closely those of *Daughters*: gender and development, law, education, the humanities, health, and agriculture. The chapters are a mixed bag. Most exclusively focus on the Anglophone Caribbean, but three (Geertje Lycklama à Nieholt, Carol Smart, and Bernadette Farquhar) are theoretical discussions without any specific reference to the Caribbean. Many of the chapters are transcripts of talks given at a series of seminars held between 1986 and 1994 and sponsored by the Project of Cooperation in Teaching and Research in Women and Development Studies at UWI, and the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague (p. xi). In the volume's introduction, Joycelin Massiah spells out the main foci of the seminars: they were concerned with methodology (p. xiii), with links outside the university community, with merging "the theoretical and the empirical" (p. xv); and, especially, with policy and management guided by the assumption that the "multi-dimensional nature of the issue of gender itself demands a multifaceted response" (p. xvii).

Bolles's *We Paid Our Dues: Women Trade Union Leaders of the Caribbean* puts women's narratives of participation in trade union movements at the center of a new Caribbean labor history. It consists of seven chapters pegged to different stages in the life narratives that Bolles collected from women trade unionists, as well as a nicely articulated theoretical and methodological introduction and a conclusion that reflects on the politics and practice of academic research. The book also contains one appendix outlining the Project for the Development of Caribbean Women in Trade Unions (by Marva Phillips), and another reproducing Bolles's questionnaire.

While these texts offer a mine of information, I was frustrated, especially with the edited collections, by their lack of theoretical focus. However, this frustration stems at least in part from my own location in the theory-driven U.S. academy. In the edited volumes, the essays sometimes speak past or contradict one other. Take Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's essay in *Daughters*, on the limits of Western feminism for the Caribbean, which proposes that, despite five centuries of colonialism, "Caribbean societies ... have managed to remain profoundly insular" (p. 5) and are "driven as much, if not more, by internal, local concerns than they are by a persistent,

continual, and continuous awareness of a colonial past" (p. 5). She therefore argues for the "limited applicability of European or U.S. theories of feminism and gender relations to a reality that may have been influenced by European American cultural patterns but which developed in fairly *local* ways in response to a collision between autochthonous and foreign cultures" (p. 7, her emphasis). But what's autochthonous in the Caribbean, as Carla Freeman asks in her excellent piece in the same volume on "pink collar" workers in the Barbados offshore information-processing industry? Paravisini-Gebert relies on troubling notions of the "experience" of Caribbean women to contest "theory" which cannot speak to that experience. But experience itself is a construct borne of a particular political and cultural history. And the women writers Paravisini-Gebert chooses as exemplars of autochthonous feminism – Phyllis Shand Allfrey and Jean Rhys – surely had very complicated relationships to the metropolis that profoundly shaped their experience.

Carol Smart's chapter in the *Gender* book provides a useful contrast. While it makes no reference to the Caribbean, it does provide an excellent overview of trends in theory that Smart believes feminists need to move beyond. In reviewing challenges to legal thought, Smart criticizes "feminist empiricism," which basically asks, "how does law affect or alternately ignore women?" and then tries to redress these wrongs. She also criticizes "standpoint feminism," which argues that women's experience gives a view of the truth of the legal system and a basis for a new one.

Smart argues that both positions derive from a liberal realism "in which it is taken for granted that we 'know' what law is, we know who or what 'women' are, and we only have to work on the relationship between these two givens" (p. 86). Her skepticism stems from the positivist bent of both approaches: if we only knew the "truth," we could "fix" things. However, not only do we never know the truth, but we also never know the consequences of our proposals (p. 87), to say nothing of what "women's experience" really is. At the same time, the law will only listen if we speak its language, and in speaking that language we blind ourselves to alternative possibilities. As Smart summarizes, "as long as we collude with the woman that legal discourse has constituted, we can have some purchase, but we do this at the expense of silencing and alienating many actual women for whom we do not speak" (p. 88). We empower "law's version of reality if we occupy the same epistemological and ontological space of law" (p. 89).

With only a handful of exceptions, the essays in the edited volumes fall rather neatly into Smart's two categories. Most adopt feminist empiricism, claiming that if only there were better data on women, and if only these

data were taken into consideration, then public policy and academic inquiry would better address women's needs and contributions. Other essays adopt standpoint feminism, arguing that women's view on matters of policy and culture give purchase on a "real" truth hidden by androcentric perspectives. Bolles's book provides, in contrast, an interesting reformulation of both feminist empiricism and standpoint feminism. It presents new feminist empirical data on women's participation in the trade union movement in terms of women trade unionists' own narratives of their experience, and hence also adopts standpoint feminism. In the process, however, it rewrites the history of the Caribbean and calls into question received categories of historiography and its various "standpoints."

Of the essays that do not fall neatly into Smart's typology, Freeman's is particularly noteworthy. It shows how women's involvement in the offshore sector as information processors redounds into their identities, and especially the identities they forge through new consumption practices facilitated by their work. But they do not reinvent their identities out of whole cloth; rather, they recuperate higglering, going on company-sponsored shopping sprees and bringing back goods to sell at the workplace. Wages become "seed money" for suitcase trading endeavors (p. 73). As women explore their new "professional" status, they participate in a "globalization of consumption and style" (p. 81). As corporations demand "professional" attire, women workers become concerned with their public persona (p. 83) and very West Indian definitions of respectable "femininity" and "status through appearance" (p. 84). Freeman eloquently summarizes, "[t]he local becomes transnational and the transnational is in turn 'localized' in a frenzied dialectic of new pressures and pleasures across the production/consumption terrain" (p. 86).

Luisa Hernández Angueira's essay in *Daughters* shows how Dominican migrant women get defined as "other" in Puerto Rico, as "their customs and bodies are socially constructed as deviant and unmanageable" (p. 99). The essay demonstrates the class, race, and gender nexus that differentiates Puerto Rican women, who aspire to "normal" patriarchal families representative of a particular class, from Dominican migrant women, who do not, and cannot. Natasha Barnes's essay, also in the *Daughters* volume, is a fascinating history of beauty pageants in Jamaica and the complex negotiations of race and nation that have marked them since their inception. Cynthia Mesh's chapter in the *Daughters* book gives a general history of creole politics in Guadeloupe and relates these to the work of Dany Bébel-Gisler. She notes the historical irony that France established a permanent colony in Guadeloupe in 1635, the same year it

established the Académie Française, highlighting connections among colonialism, language, and gender (p. 23).

The essays that I would place in the “feminist empiricism” category all provide a wealth of information on Caribbean women, if not exactly Caribbean gender or sexuality. These include, in the *Daughters* volume, Mary Johnson Osirim’s excellent historical survey of women’s participation in the labor market from the colonial period to the present; Caroline Allen’s informative review of women, health, and development in the Commonwealth Caribbean; Suzanne LaFont and Deborah Pruitt’s essay on family law in Jamaica; and Carollee Bengelsdorf’s rich chapter on Cuban women’s responses to the recent crisis. Nearly all of the contributions to the *Gender* volume adopt a feminist empiricist approach, as well, and are policy-oriented. The “Gender and Development” and “Gender Issues in Agriculture” sections rightly criticize the equation of “development” with “economic growth” and point toward policy challenges for feminist activism. Johnnetta Cole summarizes the main obstacle, namely, the “myth that third-world culture (for which read backward, primitive ways) and society’s gender system (for which read women) are the major obstacles to development” (p. 6). Eileen Boxill, Cherry Brady-Clarke, and Suzanne Ffolkes assess the dilemmas of family law and provide excellent reviews of legal changes relating to children born out of wedlock, property rights, divorce, citizenship, and husbands’ immunity from marital rape charges. The claim of these essays is that if law would recognize the reality of its impact on women, it would better serve them. This approach ignores the unintended consequences of law and legal change, brilliantly captured in Mindie Lazarus-Black’s recent work on “why women take men to magistrate’s court” (Lazarus-Black 1994).

The standpoint feminist approach is represented by Peggy Antrobus’s contribution to the *Gender* volume. She argues that bureaucratic “check-lists and guidelines, analytical frameworks and methodological tools are limited by the fact that they are situated within the dominant liberal paradigm and therefore never challenge the assumptions on which this particular model of development is based” (p. 52). Central to the problem is the misidentification of political problems as technical problems (p. 53). Gwendoline Williams’s essay in the same volume provides an example of a challenge to the dominant development paradigm. She explores three development projects in which gender was introduced as a technical variable: a World Bank report, a CARICOM training program, and the Sou Sou land project in Trinidad. The latter project introduced a kind of settlement planning based on traditional forms of banking and credit-sharing; it was participatory, democratic, and decentralized, and, she argues, it “steer[ed]

away from the dichotomy between home and work," urban and rural, and public and private (p. 70). Frances Aparicio, in the *Daughters* volume, asks what happens when seemingly sexist salsa lyrics are interpreted by women and incorporated into women's narratives about sex and gender. The answer is a complex re-reading of salsa from Puerto Rican women's unique perspectives.

A. Lynn Bolles's book shares much with the approaches of feminist empiricism and standpoint feminism, but offers more. By tacking back and forth between women's life narratives and stories of their participation in the trade union movement, and the history of the movement itself, Bolles challenges a received historiography. She authorizes – or, rather, allows women trade union leaders to authorize – another narrative of Caribbean historical and economic development, one attentive to intensely personal struggles and to conflicts with families, husbands, and male union leaders. The portrait painted is different in tone and texture from that offered by other histories of trade unionism in the region; it is more nuanced, more human.

In contrast to Bolles's book, the two edited volumes suffer from editorial sloppiness; in my copy of the *Gender* book, for example, references are incomplete for several chapters and in Ffolkes's essay one entire page is repeated and the third section is missing. In *Daughters*, Verena Martinez-Alier becomes "Vera." And I make appearances in the same volume as "Maura" and "McMaurer."

But this last error causes me to question, much as Ruth Behar does in her evocative contribution to *Daughters*, the conditions of possibility of my own theorizing. As Behar writes, reflecting on her lifelong relationship with a former domestic servant who still nurtures her, "[d]aughters of Caliban stand tall only when the backs of their mothers stretch wide" (p. 119). Aihwa Ong, quoted by Bolles, puts a different spin on this sentiment, writing that "when feminists look overseas, they frequently seek to establish *their* authority on the backs of non-Western women" (Ong 1988:180, in Bolles, p. 11, emphasis in original). Bolles herself adds another layer: "What started as an 'easy book' for me (let the women do all the talking) has grown into a multileveled work" (p. 204). For me, what started as a hospital stay leads to difficult questions. What nurture have I received from the numerous and variously positioned "daughters of Caliban" who have facilitated my theorizing? How does the implicit First Worldism of my own critique erase that nurture? And in what ways are the theoretical concerns of the U.S. academy currently spreading around the globe, like the bad fast-food (McMaurer indeed) that can lead to sickness? Can the sickness "heat things up" enough to open new lines of

knowledge, new *konesans*, or merely cause mystical images of feverish dreams in a body out of balance?

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