

Editorial

Rethinking Caribbean Difference

The task of editing a special issue of *Feminist Review* on the Caribbean is a daunting one for several reasons. It forces a partiality on a region which spans at least four linguistic divisions. In this volume, by virtue of my place of birth and present residence and work (Trinidad and Jamaica respectively), there is a reflected dominance of the English-speaking Caribbean. Putting together a relatively small volume also forces a selectivity of the wealth of material which is being produced in gender and feminism at present in the region. This material has, over the last decade, become far more interdisciplinary, much broader than the largely academic discourse which is presented here. The final selection of essays and information, none the less, attempts to represent a cross section and overview of the wider experience of activism and scholarship in Caribbean feminism.

The idea of the 'Caribbean' is a historically persistent one, as are other geographical and political spaces. We are constantly exploring both differences and similarities within the region, explaining this to ourselves and to others outside of this space. The issue is entitled 'Rethinking Caribbean Difference' because of this and for another reason. Postmodernism, which preoccupies the debates in gender at present, certainly in the North, points us towards dispensing with universalized categories and dealing with the plurality of experiences of race, class, gender and sexuality (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997: xvii) . In other words it situates difference as central to analyses of social phenomenon. What I have attempted to do in this volume is to present the Caribbean as a space in which the shared colonial and the post-colonial experience has created an internal discourse which is specific to the region and to which all the writers in this volume speak. In the choice of papers differences are manifested in the approaches and positions taken by various writers. If the postmodern discourse invites us to accept difference and celebrate it, then these must also emerge. In this sense the volume has a further uniqueness in feminist circles as it includes two male colleagues who have been both prolific in, and supportive of, the

scholarship we are engaged in, thus allowing feminism in the Caribbean to be a dialogue between men and women.

In the first paper in this volume I continue this trend of thought as I attempt to locate a standpoint from which to write indigenous feminist theory for the Caribbean. I argue that Caribbean feminism cannot be viewed as a linear narrative about women's struggles for gender equality, but a movement which has continually intersected with the politics of identity in the region. In the second paper Hilary McD. Beckles, a Barbados born historian in the region who has focused much of his attention on the recovery of women in Barbados slave history, analyses the category 'woman' as it was differentiated under the period of West Indian slavery. Beckles argues that the political fracturing of feminine identity during this time defined the distances in ethnic and class position between women of different groups, thus creating the hurdles to be crossed in the post-slavery rapprochement of the feminist project.

Rhoda Reddock has had a long history in both activism and the study of gender in the Caribbean. One of her major contributions has been recovering women in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century labour struggles in Trinidad, a pioneering body of work in the feminist scholarship of the region. In this paper, Rhoda explores the emergence of women's organizations and feminist consciousness in the twentieth-century Commonwealth Caribbean and, consistent with the first paper in this volume, illustrates the interlocked nature of women's struggles with the economic, political and social issues which affect the population at large.

A preoccupation with difference is also found in Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen's paper. Rawwida is a stalwart of the contemporary feminist movement and for many years worked as the Co-ordinator of the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action. Baksh-Soodeen suggests that there are internal differences in the activism of the region and that there is need for a more integrated movement which reflects the experience of other ethnic groups, including that of Indo-Caribbean women. Sonia Cuales was born on the island of Curacao and has had a long and close association with the women who have been involved in the second wave feminist movement in the wider Caribbean since the late 1970s. Sonia's paper searches for some of the history of women and gender in the Netherland Antilles, and suggests that much of this knowledge still needs to be uncovered by future activists and scholars.

In a paper which explores the difference in one of the Spanish speaking societies in the Caribbean, Alice E. Colón-Warren and Idsa Alegría-Ortega examine the position of women and the challenges to gender relations and the feminist movement in Puerto Rico as a result of the policies of

industrialization which were introduced into this society by its new colonizers in the twentieth century, the United States of America. Focusing on the French-speaking Caribbean territory of Haiti, Marie-Jose N'Zengou-Tayo, of Haitian descent, now resident in Jamaica, describes the journey of Haitian women from the nineteenth century to present day Haitian society, deploring the fact that the contribution of women to this society has neither been recognized nor sufficiently documented.

The uncovering of women's history and gender in the English-speaking Caribbean has been one of the key areas of scholarship and, directly or indirectly, crucial in the shaping of a feminist consciousness in the region. Bridget Brereton, a highly respected historian in the region, has been another pioneer in this field, constantly exploring new sources which are available, as well as demonstrating new methods of writing women into history. In this paper Bridget provides a glimpse of different women's lives in the Caribbean through the use of their diaries, autobiographies and letters. Linden Lewis, a Guyanese-born scholar now resident in the United States, retains a close connection with the lived realities in the region. His work on masculinity provides a sounding board of ideas and imagery, necessary for the dialectic of feminist scholarship. In a reading of a novel by Trinidadian author Earl Lovelace, Linden demonstrates the scope of the literary text as an insightful source for uncovering ideas of masculinity.

Eudine Baritteau examines the philosophical contradictions of liberal ideologies which English-speaking Caribbean states have inherited and draws on this experience to generate an analytical model of the political economy of gender systems which may be widely applicable both inside and out of the region. Jessica Byron and Diana Thorburn also examine the links between gender and political economy and society, approaching the subject through the relatively recent integration of feminist thinking in the discipline of International Relations. This is another pioneering approach to the study of gender in the region, challenging the theoretical foundations of this discipline still based on traditional male–female dichotomies, and suggesting a research agenda for ongoing feminist theorizing which integrates the dynamics of the global economy with the decisions taken by local states.

This volume includes reviews of some of the earliest books in contemporary gender scholarship produced in the English-speaking region by various Caribbean scholars, as well as short book notes by Hilary Nicholson on other more recent titles.

Several persons have assisted me during the various stages of putting together this volume. Althea Perkins and Ramona Lisa Mohammed were valuable in the earlier stages of its development. Shakira Maragh, a young

research assistant attached to the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at Mona campus, Jamaica, where the volume has taken shape, has been warmly generous with her time and crucial in the realization of the finished product. My husband Rex Dixon provided both the artwork for the cover and the constant emotional support. I am most indebted to Hilary Nicholson for her sound editorial assistance and advice. Born in the United Kingdom, Hilary has lived in the Caribbean now for nearly three decades and is remarkable both for her zeal and her many talents. She is a real 'Sistren' in the feminist movement in the Caribbean.

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Reference

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Rhoda Reddock



Bridget Brereton



Eudine Barriteau



Sonia Cuales and Patricia Mohammed



Left to right: Hilary Nicholson, June Castello, Althea Perkins, Michelle Rowley, Jessica Byron

Some of the contributors in this issue.