



Vulnerability, Persistence and Destabilization of Dominant Masculinities: An Introduction

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The study of Caribbean men is by no means new. However, the emergence of men and masculinities studies in the Caribbean, or what Rhoda Reddock refers (2004) to as the study of men as “gendered beings,” can be located within a larger body of gender and sexuality studies research produced within the last three decades. This *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* special issue on *Vulnerability, Persistence and Destabilization of Dominant Masculinities* represents a series of critical conversations intended to track a range of concerns related to gender, sexuality, men and masculinities in the Caribbean. This issue has been in the making for a very long-time and indeed persistence pays off. The study of Caribbean men and masculinities is an interdisciplinary research field focusing on non-western masculinities studies. The current special issue reflects the diverse sub-themes that have characterised men and masculinities research in the Caribbean to date.

Women, children, sexual 'minorities', nations and a host of other constructed gender non-conforming identities experience masculinity and hegemonic masculinity (in particular) as oppressive. But increasingly, hegemonic¹ masculinity itself remains an unstable category in some circles. We also recognise that often when the concept 'hegemonic masculinity' is invoked there is an assumption of consensus in its application. Hearn (2012, 593-594) reflects on the 'conceptual slipperiness' in the deployment of the concept as a result of an unresolved means through which Gramsci's hegemony is taken up, (re)framed as 'hegemonic masculinity', and redeployed "with quite different meanings, within different political, disciplinary and epistemological traditions."² We use hegemonic masculinity to signify a set of idealised, institutionalised, socio-economic, socio-cultural and political forms of manhood, and while these forms might be unattainable to most men, men are certainly encouraged into achieving them. Notably, for some men and women, hegemonic masculinity conforms to the central role of compulsory heteropatriarchal men in society. It confirms all of the 'normative' behaviours that are assigned by ritual, custom or convention for men, so that many feel a certain collective affirmation of this masculine identity (Connell 2000). Hegemonic masculinity, and its broader epistemological field of compulsory heteropatriarchy, reflects a remarkable resiliency, despite persistent interrogation and contestation. The vulnerability of hegemonic masculinity is embedded in its dependence on the affirmation of others, men's self-imposed alienation from femininity, neuroses about feminist assertion, the feminine, effemiphobia, the gender-panic, with the penis as the ultimate representation of phallic power, domination and a weaponized form of social control. These attributions highlight the profound limits of hegemonic masculinity as an ideal form of heterosexuality for all men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), by developing anti-homosexual practices, tendencies and ideologies.

Our understanding of masculinity is that it is amenable to floats and shifts contingent upon different social categories such as African-Caribbean, Indo-

Caribbean, mixed-race, skin color, class, gender nonconforming and sexual orientation. Few men within these social categories demonstrate all aspects of this ideal “hegemonic masculinity”, hence the title of our special edition is *Vulnerability, Persistence and Destabilization of Dominant Caribbean Masculinities*. We understand masculine identities as constantly changing within and responding to different cultural and political contexts and constructs, but we also recognise a persistence tendency to align masculinity to power and privilege. These tensions in the ideological and material bases in men’s articulations of self are explored as part of this special issue.

Early Caribbean gender and masculinity scholars (Miller 1986; Chevannes and Brown 1998; Clark 1957; Perry 1996; Reddock 2004; Mohammed 1994, and Lewis 1998, 2000) have all examined masculinity and manhood in relation to gender and family relations as a starting point for making intelligible men and masculinities in the Caribbean. Heteropatriarchal hegemony forces some men to pride themselves on hard work, to conceptualize a distorted authenticity to their being and to cling to traditional cultural roles as main providers to their families and friends within male peer support circles. It also trains men to accept financial payment for work — over feelings or personal satisfaction — it also encourages subterfuge among men as they seek to present socially acceptable selves.

The problematic at this particular juncture framed the following question: how are men coping in the context of a prevailing neoliberal economic agenda, in which, unemployment is chronic, the creation of a global ‘precariat’ class is growing (Standing 2011) and in which there is little hope of appeasement in sight? The precariat class and precarious working conditions are displacing the salariat³ or salaryman, whose pain is revealed by an alarming rise in suicides and social illnesses as noted in research done by Standing (2011) in the UK. Work, as a master’s status as we know sociologically, constitutes the core of identity in the climate of neoliberalism. To be unemployed for extended periods is quite destabilizing for both men and women. The Caribbean is a region where large

groups of women have been a part of the paid labour force for a very long time so unemployment cuts at the core of how women position themselves and are positioned relative to others (children, family, friends, *inter alia*). Men's ideological investment in the provider role may in part explain how unemployment functions as a form of emasculation, but it is also disconcerting to some women who also have certain expectations of the roles that their men, boyfriends, sons, and partners are required to perform in society and in the household. Precarious work and the poor-paprization of women in general intensifies the vulnerability and destabilization of Caribbean men's masculinities, while ensuring heteropatriarchal capitalist exploitation of women and children. Long ago, Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (1994) asked a most pertinent question about this phenomenon that has become even more widespread in the contemporary Caribbean: what do men do when they can no longer bring home the bread or the bacon? And for many parents in the Caribbean, their worries are how will their boys become men if they cannot find work. Evidently, they do not stop being men. They must find ways of regrouping and moving forward, shifting their sense of themselves in ways that make sense. It is not only those men without jobs who are made vulnerable, but those with jobs are increasingly faced with new machinations of insecurity about the jobs they so tenuously hold. Women and men must face an uncertain future in which several social protections are being eroded, medical benefits are being cut back, promised social security benefits are being paid in piecemeal fashion, with the creation of the precariat class. There is the relentless threat that at any time the offshore companies can close their doors, or Caribbean governments can be instructed by "market forces" to further trim government fat, or how to establish new ways of negotiating the many regimes of control placed on them in the factory or office by management. These vulnerabilities are material, social and psychological. Not only do they present material burdens on families, but they also weigh heavily on men's sense of self, self-confidence; and furthermore they demonstrate precisely the point that Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne made and referred to earlier in this article about the dislocation and destabilization of masculinity. [Unemployment therefore requires that we make

adjustments, that we adjust expectations and we continue to be the best we can be in the circumstances, until we can do better. Masculinity cannot be reduced to a singularity of purpose. We are too resourceful to limit our options in this way].

Vulnerability, Persistence and Destabilization of Dominant Caribbean Masculinities, is also a challenge to economic-masculinity and various forms of Caribbean masculinities that emphasize sexual and violent overtones as dangerous and exciting. On decolonization, Fanon reminds us “at whatever level we study it... decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men” (1961: 35). The nature of decolonization and masculinity is the gendering of consciousness or the reciprocal influence the colonized and the colonizer exercise on each other in the formation of their respective gendered masculine identities. Our volume also echoes Spivak’s influential article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” We do not want to exclude the voices and representation of Caribbean men by Caribbean men, a recurring phenomenon within Western discourse on masculinity studies (1988). We fully appreciate that the focus on women and gender, introduced by women in the Caribbean, was instrumental in pushing men to think of themselves as gendered and gendering subjects. Since we believe that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed mutually defining phenomena, we are proud of the space provided by the *Institutes for Gender and Development Studies* on all three campuses of The University of the West Indies, for men and women to be engaged in discourses on gender and sexually diverse populations (LGBTQ and questioning). We find much of the writings of women on Caribbean masculinity to be very insightful and perceptive. Hence articulations and narratives of representation are central to this volume on *Vulnerability, Persistence and Destabilization of Dominant Caribbean Masculinities*. Caribbean hypermasculinities, in this context, offer us interesting insights on how we might navigate, negotiate and understand gender non-conforming performances of Caribbean culture where it is assumed to be one of heterohypermasculinity. We believe that the recent publication by Donna

Hope is a particularly useful start to the question of gender non-conforming. In her article, Hope analyzes an emerging space of gender non-conformity in which traditional forms of masculinity combine with emerging patterns of the same to blur the lines of performance of hypermasculinity, hyper-questioning and homoerotic male peer support bonding. A dancehall bonding, where masculinity is embedded in visual glitter, bright clothing, a camp quasi-feminine hairstyling and sexuality, is less binary and falls within a more fluid understanding of the lived experience of some men (Hope 2013). Dialectically therefore, we are hopeful that in general, vulnerability and destabilization would not only be read as disruptive but would also be viewed in light of the spaces these tendencies can open up for a broader, more nuanced understanding of men and masculinity in the Caribbean. Majors and Billson (1992) reminds us that the problem with the term hypermasculine is that it oversimplifies the impact of race, class and, in the Caribbean situation, colonial oppression. Collins (2006: 93) calls upon Black and racial minority men to work on developing definitions of masculinities that would enable them to see their self-worth more than a paycheck. The clarion call here is for men not only to see themselves as economic providers when employed, but also through unpaid wages to see that they can be providers of emotions, support, feelings and empathy while simultaneously keeping the family stable through other forms of provisions. In essence, we want to argue that Caribbean masculinities have been gender bending and have been gender non-conforming for centuries, where masculinities represents not a fixed type of manhood or man, rather men position themselves through different structural, political, economic and cultural dynamics. Mangan, quoted in Beynon (2002:90) reminds us that masculine gender identity is never stable; its terms are continually being re-defined and re-negotiated, the gender performance continually being re-staged. Certain themes and tropes inevitably re-appear with regularity, but each era experiences itself in remarkably different ways.

The broad coverage of the critical essays and gender dialogues reflects CRGS' commitment to producing interdisciplinary research in the field of feminist

and gender studies. These conversations foreground critical aspects of the lives of men, women and children in the Caribbean, with a focus on articulations of masculinity. The gender dialogues offer a series of provocations and reflections on critical issues as they face men. For instance, Alissa Trotz' reflection is an attempt to understand the unfortunate circumstances surrounding a young man in Guyana, who was arrested, beaten and viciously sodomized while in police custody. Trotz explores the social, political, racial and gender implications of this incident. Her contribution can be read alongside AbioyeMunashe's poetry. Read together, we observe that the physical, sexual and symbolic violence enacted by the state through a series of actors must be understood as occurring at the intersections of race, class, gender and coloniality in the lives of men.

These intersections are further explored in the essay by Wesley Crichlow, as he critically evaluates the experiences of young Black men in Toronto who are both victims of state perpetrated violence and participate in various forms of interpersonal violence. Arguing that young Black men have their masculinity "weaponized" and "prisonized" by the state, Crichlow shows how specific racialised, sexualized and colonized groups are made even more vulnerable as a consequence of a state sponsored initiative to eradicate criminality. The essay not only contributes to the conceptual understanding of the cycles of violence to which young Black men in Toronto are exposed, but it points to the responsibility of the state in creating more beneficial outcomes for its citizens.

Likewise, the relationship between men, masculinities and violence is also explored in the essay "Pullin rank" by Hakim Mohandas Amani Williams. Williams is particularly concerned about how masculinities intersect with school violence and the structural context within which this occurs. He uses a series of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations and classroom discussions conducted over a seven month period at a secondary school in Trinidad and Tobago as his main sources of data, and these were followed up three years later by a three-week observation. As part of the cultural vocabulary of the

country, he deploys 'pullin rank' as a localised concept to signify "the hyper-exertion of authority and power." It becomes an explanatory framework for how specific manifestations of hegemonic masculinity feature in the school setting, but it is also anchored within specific socio-structural dynamics. He proposes that both structural and direct violence is evident in a spectrum of 'masculinist posturing', which exists as part of a neocolonial hegemonic masculinity. Anchored within the hegemonic masculinity framework, the essay expands the conceptual vocabulary of this subtheme within men and masculinity studies.

One of the most overt and damaging responses to gender transgressions away from a heteronormative sexualised scripting of masculinity is through the perpetration of violence, which is also the subject of the essay by Carl E. James and Andrea A. Davis on "Jamaican males" readings of masculinities and the relationship to violence." James and Davis analyse the intersections of gender, sexuality and violence in accounts drawn from focus group interviews provided by diverse groupings of Jamaican young men residing in urban and rural communities. They found young men in their sample were united in their criticism of homosexuality as 'inappropriate behaviour'. There was a general fear of violence among rural and urban young with rural men eschewing the image of the 'bad man'. Rural men were also found to express "a greater sense of pessimism about their life chances," while urban men imagined themselves as mentors, agents of change and cited education as a means through which to achieve success. The essay by James and Davis points to critical areas for intervening in the lives of young men, on the one hand, to challenge the homophobia inherent in the construction of masculine identity and, on the other hand, to address the experiences of social dislocation among Jamaican youth.

Popular culture and the politics of representation are featured in the essay by Linden Lewis. Lewis analyses the construction of masculinity in Calypso through its lyrics. A central concern in this paper is the relationship between the artist and the people in the creation of what it means to be a man in the Caribbean. Using calypsos of the 1960s (particularly those by Lord Kitchener and

the Mighty Sparrow) Lewis' analysis exposes the dominant narratives within this art form about what "constitutes manliness," the negative outcomes of these hegemonic renderings of masculinity for both women and men, the construction of men's sexualised selves, and the effects of the male gaze on Caribbean men's relations with and views on women.

Similarly, in Kimalee Phillip's essay, Carnival and the performance of mas become critical sites for the subversion of respectability politics, the enactment of gender transgressions, the expression of Afro-Caribbean spirituality and traditions, and the contestation of normative sexualised representations. Through an analysis of Carnival as a dominant socio-cultural event within Caribbean societies Phillip asks us to rethink, reimagine and redefine both the gender normative and heteronormative scripting of identity relations that so popularly circulate as commonsense.

In keeping with the interrogation of popular cultural forms in the Caribbean, 'Moving dancehall off island' by Karen Flynn traces the role of popular culture in providing a space for the expression of black identity in a diaporic context. Here again, popular culture (in the form of music) functions as an important site for the contestation of identity relations. In this instance, race animates the discussion of gender and sexuality in dancehall among black Canadian youth. In much the same way as Carolyn Cooper (1994 and 2004) has done in her work on dancehall in Jamaica, Flynn challenges a narrative on dancehall as inherently misogynous and patriarchal, and makes a case for its 'redemptive' and possibly 'empowering' effect on black youth in Toronto. Dancehall, according to Flynn, provides a space in which women can function as autonomous sexual beings through their articulation of their sexual desires.

In conclusion, the emerging challenges for masculinities studies in the Caribbean are similar to those that have emerged in North American gender, feminist, queer, trans and masculinity studies. Omi and Winant's (1994) theorization of 'racial projects' is simultaneously an interpretation,

representation, recognition or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning (1994: 56). Caribbean masculinities, like racial projects, are in a process of *Persistence Destabilization*, ever-evolving with every generation linking it to culture and political economy. A different ideological critique in our work on Caribbean masculinity studies is warranted in order to understand the challenging complexities of gender-based violence, violence against transgendered bodies, homosocial bonding, male peer support, poverty and social disfranchisement in which men experience and understand masculinities. (Nurse 2003, 2004) Part of this critique must also center on the creation of a Caribbean prison nation wherein men are socialized by state structural violence (poverty and the prison) to understand violence as a form of achievement. Sociologists Majors and Billison refer to this violence as resource used by men to attain instrumentally their desired goals and status especially when other routes to achievement remain blocked (1992). A critique and understanding of the social and systemic structures that block disenfranchised and working-class men's ability to reject and unlearn violence is deeply needed. In addition, as we continue to explore the conceptual vocabulary of men and masculinities studies more work will be needed to (re)think how we engage available explanatory frameworks and concepts for understanding the experiences of Caribbean men. We offer this special issue on *Vulnerability, Persistence and Destabilization of Dominant Masculinities* as part of the ongoing critical work of unpacking and reframing knowledge (across a range of themes) about men and masculinities in the Caribbean.

¹ The term hegemony was first introduced by Lenin (1917) and others, in connection with the class alliance in which the proletariat led the peasantry in Russia, and popularized by Antonio Gramsci in [Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci](#), edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Lawrence and Wishart, and International Publishers; London, and New York: 1971).

² It is worth recognising that there is some concern about the slippage which occurs when Raewyn Connell and other scholars redeploy Gramsci's notion of hegemony as cultural ascendancy/legitimation (rather than out-and-out brute force). There is a relative lack of application of the concept of hegemonic masculinity in the study of violence by men to known women, in spite of its wide application as an explanatory concept in men and masculinity studies more generally (Hearn 2012). In fact Hearn (2012: 593) demonstrates that it "has *not* become a key conceptual element in most feminist/profeminists theoretical and practical work on men's violence against women."

³ The salariat is concentrated in large corporations, government agencies and public administration, including the civil service (Standing, 2011:8)

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