



Mental Health, Madness, Disability, and Gender in the Caribbean and Diaspora: Engaging and ongoing discussions

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Acknowledgements: Thank you to all of the contributors to this journal, including the reviewers and CRGS editorial staff.

Keywords: Mental health; madness, disability; disablement; Caribbean; gender

How to cite

Fatimah Jackson-Best and Savitri Persaud. 2021. "Mental Health, Disability, and Gender in the Caribbean and Diaspora: Engaging and ongoing discussions" *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 15: 1–16

Introduction

We are honoured to present this issue on disability, mental health, and disablement for the Caribbean Review of Gender Studies. The thematic focus of this issue was borne out of numerous conversations and a shared interest in engaging with ongoing discussions about the intersections of gender, disability, and mental health in the Caribbean and Diaspora.

We remain deeply inspired by the words of Audre Lorde, whose lessons from her germinal text, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*, continue to resonate: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde 1988, 130). Forever a visionary, by linking care to her survival, Lorde reminds us that participating in liberatory work necessitates a prioritization of our wellness and well-being. We have seen other Black and Caribbean feminists make similar assertions: Angela Davis (2016) says, "Self-care and healing and attention to the body and the spiritual dimension – all of this is now a part of radical social justice struggles." And Llana James (2007), who writes: "Feminist activism and theorizing within the African Diaspora [...] must include discussions about our physical and psychic well-being in order to truly generate strategies for surviving and thriving" (229). Grounded by these reminders, this issue is offered as a contribution to our collective care, and we hope it will be utilized as a mechanism for survival and our eventual liberation.

Justice and liberation are particularly urgent themes in this issue due to its thematic focus. In the region and across Caribbean communities in the Diaspora there is increased discourse about mental health and disability, but policies and protections for people with these lived realities and challenges have been slower to materialize. Accessibility remains a major barrier across the Caribbean, and this prevents people living with disabilities from equally participating in society. We also know that stigma and discrimination worldwide continue to marginalize those who live with mental illness (Jackson-Best and Edwards 2018). We often see discourse and talk prelude action from our states

and governments; however, in the wait time between political promises and action, we experience the impacts of adverse health outcomes and lives lost as a consequence of this delay. As proponents for gender justice, it is essential to remember that the pressure we apply to our governments to advance the rights of women and LGBTQIA groups must also include advocacy for the rights and recognition of people living with mental health challenges and disabilities, and that oftentimes these identities overlap in unexpected ways.

The contributions in this issue mirror the many ways mental health, disability, and disablement are spoken about, worked through, and actioned on in our communities. The papers, commentaries and reviews hone in on the academic work that has been generated on these major themes. The contributions to the Gender Dialogues section provide arts-based approaches that explore these topics.

Sue Ann Barratt's paper explores how Caribbean university students cultivate strategies to navigate diagnosed mental illness and academic achievement. The paper is unique for several reasons, including the ways it decentralizes conceptions of expertise by centring students' experiences and narratives, and its provision of insight into how students develop and apply treatment strategies to deal with diagnosed mental illness. Using "personal testimony as a demonstrative research narrative", Barratt (2021) outlines a roadmap developed by students which uses lessons learned through their experience managing their mental health within academic environments.

Fatimah Jackson-Best's commentary paper focuses on findings from two studies conducted by the author; a maternal depression research study conducted in Barbados and a global-health focused systematic review of stigma and intersectionality. These studies provide evidence that mental illness and disability stigma amongst Caribbean women exists, but questions why so few retrievals from the systematic review of stigma focused on this group. The commentary also includes observational analysis from research in the Anglophone Caribbean

and makes the case for increased research on mental illness stigma and physical disability stigma focused on Caribbean women across racial, linguistic, geographic and ethnic differences.

Laura Loth's essay examines disability, trauma, and the role of the metaphor through an engagement with the work of Guadeloupian-French author Gisèle Pineau, whose memoir – *Folie, Aller Simple: Journée Ordinaire d'une Infirmière* (2010) – details Pineau's parallel careers as a writer and a psychiatric nurse working in France. The reception of the metaphor as an analytical tool is contentious throughout diverse fields of study. For example, it is often considered problematic within disability studies, while it tends to hold a place of prominence in trauma studies (Berger 2004). Loth argues that Pineau's memoir offers a space of coexistence and fluidity for disability and trauma. Through the use of what Loth describes as Pineau's "Poetics of Disaster" and disaster imagery, Loth examines and interrogates how Pineau creates space to critically engage with the material conditions of immigration, displacement, and postcolonial relations within and between France, the Francophone Caribbean and its Diaspora. Loth's paper offers a nuanced literary perspective that is rooted in understanding the multifaceted socio-politico-economic relations that are indelibly shaped by imperialist and capitalist histories and relations between the West and the Caribbean. Loth's contribution gives us pause because it reminds us of how these relations are evermore seething, present and exacerbated in the age of COVID-19.

Ria Mohammed-Davidson's contribution analyzes the degree to which the issue of double discrimination is sufficiently attended to in Commonwealth Caribbean jurisprudence. Mohammed-Davidson illustrates how Commonwealth Caribbean law – specifically in the areas of criminal law, family law, and constitutional law – has not effectively addressed the particular concerns of disabled Caribbean women, whose material contexts are adversely shaped at the intersections of gender and disability discrimination. The law, in some cases, upholds harmful stereotypes about disabled women or often relies on a formal approach to

equality, which does not consider substantive differences that uniquely impact this specific group. However, international law and jurisprudence emerging from Guyana and Belize offer points of contrast. Mohammed-Davidson underscores how these examples, attuned to the gendered dimensions of disability, provide lessons for a new way forward and can be utilized to call for substantive change. Her paper is crucial in bringing attention to the shortfalls of Commonwealth Caribbean jurisprudence and the adverse effects experienced by women with disabilities. Mohammed-Davidson's advocacy for a dignity-centric approach is a necessary and vital intervention concerned with comprehensively addressing and ameliorating the disadvantages and negative outcomes experienced by disabled women in the Caribbean.

The essay by Ryan Persadie engages with artistic productions and Caribbean understandings of madness, mental health/illness, and disability at the crossings of soca music, race, colonial histories and inheritances, and Carnival. Persadie asserts that soca creates spaces of strategic performativities – avenues to think, communicate, and express selfhood – where the metamorphization of madness illuminates Caribbean logics, histories, lived experiences, and the liberational spirit of the tradition. Like Loth, Persadie analyzes the function and capacity of the metaphor within diverse areas of study as he thinks through the problematics and consiliences that shape the use of the device. Persadie acknowledges and questions soca's heavy use of ableist language and tropes as he fastidiously apprehends how – by building on the scholarship of Shalk (2018), Erevelles (2011) and Barker (2011) – “the construction of disability works through the material and metaphorical simultaneously and must be theorized in their historical, representational specificity, and lived contexts” (Persadie 2021). Particularly through his examination of soca artist Uncle Ellis' Carnival hit “I Doh Mind”, Persadie (2021) explores how this song is full of “multidimensional complexities in performing madness as a practice of self-making by someone who is identified and self-identifying as ‘mad’ outside of soca performance”. Persadie explores and unmask the limitations and possibilities of the metamorphization of madness; his careful interventions offer us comprehensive and responsive ways to disrupt conventional uses and understandings of the device in favour of a

complex and context-specific analysis that attends to distinct Caribbean realities.

F.J. Genus' creative offering in the Gender Dialogues section is an exploration of transgender identities depicted through the experience of a Black queer transgender man named Nate who is on a journey of self-exploration. Genus' piece provides nuance in a representational landscape that has seen an increase of transgender narratives and stories, but still tends to depict the transgender experience through binary frameworks which focus on either masculine or feminine representations. The creative piece is written from a point of acknowledgement that such representations fail to convey the diversity of the lived experiences of transgender people, and his short story, "Identity", works to give a fuller depiction of these realities.

The short story "Giving Voice to Avril" by Fatimah Jackson-Best draws on a phantom character from author Naomi Jackson's 2015 debut novel *The Star Side of Bird Hill*. The story follows two young sisters sent to spend the summer with their maternal grandmother in Barbados of 1989. One of the underlying tensions in the book centres on the girls' mother, Avril, who is living with mental illness in Brooklyn and sent them to Barbados after experiencing a severe mental health crisis. After her suicide, the impact of her undisclosed mental illness and the mourning for what once was can be felt beyond borders and oceans. The short story seeks to give voice to Avril, through a first-person narrative from her perspective as she grapples with her past, her mental illness, and the decision to send her daughters home to her mother. The narrative illuminates tensions in Avril's life as she wrestles with issues around motherhood, mental illness, stigma and notions of "home".

Amilcar Sanatan's creative non-fiction contribution to the Gender Dialogues section discusses the trauma of childhood sexual abuse experienced by boys. Through evocative and cutting prose, Sanatan explores how patriarchal belief systems – informed by hegemonic masculinity and ideas of male sexual

dominance and virility – operate to silence victims by preventing them from acknowledging abuse and inhibiting them from seeking social supports to address their trauma. The poignancy of Sanatan's (2021) essay is particularly felt when he writes about the sexual abuse and violation of young Omar at the hands of an adult, a woman: "Back then, I did not accept that there were big women like the big men in maxis who targeted children, carried them places away from innocence and left them to decide what happened to them in the silence of a fallen sky." Sanatan's discussion of the taboos and stigma surrounding this issue is candid and bold. His work pushes us to have honest conversations and to expose these harms – to recognize and to name these crimes as abuse, molestation and sexual violence in order to confront and combat these injustices and to compassionately address trauma.

Karen Naidoo's contribution provides a detailed review of the edited collection *Caribbean Healing Traditions: Implications for Health and Mental Health* (Sutherland, Moodley, and Chevannes 2013). Naidoo's review of this important text highlights how Caribbean people – across diverse ethnic backgrounds and communities (African, Indian, Chinese, Indigenous, European) – have holistically cared for themselves and have been responsible for their wellness and the preservation of their societies before and after colonization and imperialism, which ushered in the Western biomedical model. Significantly, Naidoo's contribution points to a gap in the reviewed text as she calls for more engagement with the mental health issues affecting those in the Diaspora living abroad and outside of the Caribbean region. She incisively highlights how Caribbean communities stand to benefit from the inclusion of this research because of what it reveals about the nuances of these particular experiences.

At the time of publication, we have marked a grim anniversary and have spent over one year living through the ruptures of the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus has claimed over 2.5 million lives worldwide, with thousands succumbing in the Caribbean region (Dong, Du, and Gardner 2020). Curfews, physical/social distancing, quarantines, and border closures have characterized many of our

experiences since March 2020, as we have radically changed how we engage with our communities in order to limit the spread of this virus. Over the last year, we also witnessed COVID-19 lay bare the consequences of structural inequalities and inequities persisting in our societies. This has created an environment for the pandemic to wreak havoc on the lives of those among us who have been made even more vulnerable. This includes Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities; poor people; LGBTQIA groups; and persons who live with disabilities and mental health challenges. Bain, Dryden, and Walcott (2020) write that “racism, poverty, incarceration, limited literacy, over-crowded living conditions, lack of social supports and limited access to health services are chronic conditions that must be considered during this pandemic.” Indeed, these issues were not borne out of the pandemic, but they have been exacerbated by COVID-19. This is a sobering reminder for us to reflect on and to consider our routes of advocacy and action as we imagine a future that centres those who have been most marginalized.

The pandemic has upended what is so commonly referenced as a normal way of life and living. Our news is filled with a kind of nostalgia whose subtexts and direct appeals are often a desperate call for a return to this normal. Politicians, in particular, are central orators and advocates of this call. But what is this normal that is longed for? As we experienced the full effects of COVID-19 lockdown measures, Dionne Brand (2020) – the distinguished poet, novelist, essayist and professor born in Trinidad and Tobago and teaching at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada – wrote a poignant piece in the Toronto Star that, in part, asks us this very question. She outlines the material realities and implications of returning to a normal that was never informed or practiced with the liberation of all people in mind. Brand (2020) is surgical in her analysis:

The repetition of “when things return to normal” as if that normal, was not in contention. Was the violence against women normal? Was the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism normal? Was white supremacy normal? Was the homelessness growing on the streets

normal? Were homophobia and transphobia normal? Were pervasive surveillance and policing of Black and Indigenous and people of colour normal? Yes, I suppose all of that was normal. But, I and many other people hate that normal.

And while Brand (2020) knows “the more benign meanings of normal; having dinner with friends; going to the movies; going back to work (not so benign),” she tells us that this perceived, nonthreatening type of normal is predicated on a “dis-eased” one. It is the malignancy, insidiousness and inhumanity of this “dis-eased” yet familiar normal, which denies the most basic of rights and dignity to marginalized people that Brand is concerned with. It is this normal that must be contested, halted and disassembled.

The “endoskeleton” of this normal that Brand (2020) references is one that is knowing to Caribbean people living with a range of disabilities and mental health challenges in the region and in the Diaspora. The reality of these COVID-19 times strips bare the injustices that these groups already understand so intimately; injustices that are constitutive parts of this normal long before the global pandemic. In 2020, the gruesome killing of Susan Bogle, a disabled woman who was shot dead in her home by a member of the military during a police-military operation in Jamaica, is a part of this normal (The Gleaner 2020). The violent death of Steffon Francis in 2019, who was an inpatient at Guyana's National Psychiatric Hospital at the time of his killing, is a part of this normal (Stabroek News 2020). In Haiti, the 2016 murders of three deaf women – Jesula Gelin, Vanessa Previl, and Monique Vincent – who were perceived as lougawou or lougrou (monstrous, evil spirits in Haitian and Caribbean mythology) and were tortured and beaten to death, is a part of this normal (Leach 2016). In Canada, the 2014 police killing of Jermaine Carby, a man whose family immigrated from Jamaica and who experienced mental health challenges, is a part of this normal (Nazareth 2016; Paul 2014). In 2012, the wrongful detainment of Cheryl Miller, who was “dragged from her office and forcibly committed to the St. Ann's Psychiatric Hospital” in Trinidad, is a part of this normal (Achong,

2019). All of these cases and countless others are symptoms of this longstanding normal in societies where social suffering among equity-seeking groups is intensified and made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic (Alleyne 2020; Bennett 2020; Gopaulchan 2020; Red Thread 2020; Smith-Cartwright 2021; Trebucq 2020; UN ECLAC 2020; Wilson-Harris 2020). The virtue-signaling and gradualism of the insincere forms of “help” that is so barefaced and ham-handedly offered by Caribbean governments and politicians to poor and marginalized people is inhumane; this form of incrementalism, done in the name of “progress” – whose “progress” though? – must be rejected and fiercely countered because such pittance will never be sufficient in fostering equitable societies. The dismantling of this normal and the necessary rebuilding that will accompany it must centre the voices and priorities of equity-seeking groups, including Caribbean people living with a range of disabilities and mental health challenges in the region and in the Diaspora.

The contributions in this special issue offer critical perspectives that examine and question this normal. The authors skillfully identify the taken-for-granted assumptions of this normal and ask pointed and necessary questions about which people are welcomed to participate as full members in the realm of normalcy. They pose critiques and make demands of a normal in need of demolition. More pressingly, these contributions, in their own way, are a call to action and an appeal for continued and sustained theory, research, and activist praxis in this budding area. It is our hope that readers engage these contributions with an open mind and leave with a greater understanding about how specific issues of disability, mental health, disablement, and their resonances touch the lives of Caribbean people. To this end, which we hope is a beginning, we conclude with Brand (2020), who engages a moving paraphrasis from the work of Haitian academic and anthropologist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot:

But I hear what they say and many others do as well, “Look we should never live the way we lived before; our lives need not be

framed by the purely extractive, based on nothing but capital." Everything is up in the air, all narratives for the moment have been blown open – the statues are falling – all the metrics are off, , if only briefly. To paraphrase Trouillot, we want 'a life that no narrative could provide, even the best fiction.' The reckoning might be now.

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