The Culture of Violence in Trinidad and Tobago: A Case Study

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Defining Terms and Purpose

The plan for this Special Issue of the **Caribbean Review of Gender Studies** came from a Workshop which Paula and I ran with the support of the Centre for Gender Studies at St. Augustine in May 2004. At that time we were working on **Writing Rage** (Morgan and Youssef, 2006), a collection of essays in which we explored the treatment of violent encounters in Caribbean society through diverse discourses, both spoken and written. As we delved through not only the literature, but the media, the judicial record, personal narratives and the history of the region, we rediscovered how deeply ingrained into the fabric of Caribbean society are both the violent response and its diverse interpretations. There was a strong gender and family element in the violence, both historically and currently, since women and children inevitably bore the brunt of the violence, as being the weaker, both physically and socially; while the male was more often the perpetrator of violence but yet emerged as deeply scarred by it, lashing out at myriad overwhelming situations and circumstances. We felt that if we could bring together those diverse persons in society who experience or deal with violence in their work and home contexts we could better pool our resources towards healing this scourge. That was the purpose of that initial gathering and remains the purpose of this Issue; several of the papers within it were first presented on that day.

But what do we mean when we speak of a **Culture of Violence**, and further, can one nation, as a case study of a region, have relevance for the rest? To answer these questions we must unpackage our terms Culture, Culture of Violence and Case Study.

Let us begin with some well-accepted definitions of culture with a focus on way of life:

> Culture: learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day-to-day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism (Damen 1987, 367).

> Culture is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values. (Hofstede 1984, 51).

Culture then constitutes:

- Shared patterns of living which pervade societal interaction;
- A society's primary adaptive mechanism;
- The distinguishing collective programming of the human mind;
- A system of collectively held values.

Culture is, of course, learned and transmitted from one generation to another. The reasons why we cannot simply put slavery, indenture, and colonialism behind us, and move on, is because the cultures which developed in those times became an inheritance for following generations. As Bridget Brereton's Historical Background, which is necessarily the first paper in this Issue, indicates clearly, the violence meted out in those times was sufficiently brutal, not just to the body, but more significantly to the human psyche, that it evoked a plethora of violent responses not merely against the oppressor but against the self, and these violent responses are far less readily resolved than the mere removal of the original heinous imperial system of governance. In Caribbean societies, colonialism is deeply implicated in the manner in which violence has become a variously way of life, a means of adaptation to problems too profound to plumb, a value system which, paradoxically, brings status and reward in a world that appears to offer little by any other means. Many of its victims do find effective and productive means of overcoming, but others do not, such that the violence implodes on itself and becomes a self-perpetuating force. As we immerse ourselves in a culture, however, we come to comprehend it; and our comprehension empowers us to mediate and to change it.

Our focus on a "culture of violence" needs to be distinguished from the use of the same term by the United Nations, since the latter has become sufficiently well known that it might be assumed we are talking about the same thing. When UNESCO in 1994, moved to replace a culture of violence with one of peace, they were conceptualizing the term in the broader context of world nations' engagement in war. Later in the 1990's the larger body of the United Nations also took up this task, aiming not just to build peace after conflict had occurred but to promote a culture of peace which would actively prevent violent conflict from arising. In this context the UN General Assembly designated the year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace. Its ongoing programmes to promote a Culture of Peace are wide-ranging and include the eradication of poverty; the preservation of the environment; the empowerment of all oppressed groups including,

especially, women; the equipping of peoples with dialogue and mediation skills; information-sharing and transparency among governments. It must be clear then that its agenda is somewhat different from our own more contained approach.

Ours is not a world agenda but a local one, and it focuses not on nations and national wars, global environmental and socio-economic issues, important as these unquestionably are. It is concerned with the comprehension and eradication of a societal malaise, which, like a cancer, eats away at the mind and body of a people, until it consumes them. It looks deep within the society, puts the society under a microscope if you will, in order to determine the cause of the disease, the environment which enables it to flourish, and to find means, by a collaboration of minds, to suppress the virus which is feeding and undermining the body politic.

There will be many times when global and local movements will interface with each other. And we are reminded of a project undertaken between UNESCO, the Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences, UWI, Mona and the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication, in April 2007, when they jointly launched two educational videos, produced under the supervision of Pro-Vice Chancellor Ronald Young: one on the challenges of representation of violence and crime in the media by Franklyn St. Juste; and the second on the link between violence and brain function, specifically examining the effect of negative social and environmental experience on the brain. Such opportunities for meaningful collaboration are indeed of the utmost significance, enabling the work of one nation to have an impact on many others.

The works in this issue, however, represent a society examining itself in the profound hope that internal healing can be achieved, and a reinvigorated impetus to collaboration thereby achieved. The issues which it examines, while not unique to the Caribbean region, are certainly not common to all nations to the same degree for they represent the challenges facing a multi-ethnic, multi-religious New World nation in transition to independence and autonomy, but yet dealing with the psychological damage of the past. Former colonial powers do not have these encumbrances in the same way, though they certainly have others.

The papers in this issue then look first of all at the legacy of history, to the deliberate destruction of male-female relationships and families during slavery and the objectification of men, women and children as labourers in the productive, reproductive and sexual sectors. They move on to examine the raw violence of indenture, where males tried to effectively reassert their loss of control of their women by any means possible in a society which emasculated them too and positioned them in an adversarial manner against the colonial powers on the one hand, and the emancipated African population on the other. They deal with violence against children which became institutionalized as the cycle of violence turned inwards on itself; violence against women who became the scapegoats of men who had lost their role and purpose and needed to blame someone within their reach for their aimlessness. It deals with homophobic violence, loosed primarily by men against one another in a world where the capacity for violence has become the prime identifier of maleness, and others subscribing to a different, less

violent signifier, must be undermined before they undermine that image. Women who love women also bear the onslaught of violence, for their same sex desire similarly undermines the fragile male psyche. Indeed, in a larger frame, the analyses deal with male marginalization, whether real or perceived; for whichever pertains, the male feels threatened, undermined, in education and the working sphere, a public domain over which he had once held control. The papers examine how the abusive male sees his own situation and how the abused female works though her pain.

When we examine the range of issues dealt with it becomes clear that Trinidad and Tobago can stand as a very real case study for the region. Notwithstanding that indentureship and the wholesale import of a large number of persons from the Indian subcontinent over a period of seventy years was peculiar to Trinidad and Guyana alone, the overall dynamic of a small post-Independence state in which there is a culture of violence imploding on itself remains the same.

A case study looks intensely at a single case, whether that may involve an individual, a corporation, or any other small grouping in order to describe it as effectively and comprehensively as possible. When large scale studies fail it is because there can be no detailed investigation of subparts of the universe under investigation; and the individual becomes lost in the overall generalizations which can become so vague as to be meaningless. Researchers agree as to the value of case study investigations but disagree as to their wider applicability. It is generally held that a case study can tentatively stand for a larger body of groupings, where they can be established as having sufficient in common.

Not every manifestation of violence in Trinidad and Tobago can be expected to show up in other states of the Caribbean; Trinidad is relatively large with an overpopulated capital and is highly industrialized and heavily dependent on oil and natural gas; poverty is still high and infrastructural development not what it should be in a state which appears highly prosperous and spends wantonly on superficialities. Tobago retains a more rural culture than Trinidad but the interface and exchange between the two islands has become significant, and a drug and transactional sex culture, underlying a tourism-based economy with considerable underemployment, has brought its own share of violence, though on a much smaller scale. We are relieved that our problems are not altogether shared by countries like Grenada and St. Lucia which have retained a more rural lifestyle and share much in common with Tobago rather than Trinidad. Each state, each island, has its own distinct culture and character, but what we can say is that where the issues are shared, our case study can prove instructive. If we can come to comprehend the psyche of the violent individual in Trinidad and Tobago, some of the causes of violence, some of its ramifications, some of the means of overcoming it, then that will be instructive for the rest of the region to the extent that those problems exist within it.

The papers
The first article in this Issue has, as mentioned earlier, been produced by historian Bridget Brereton and documents succinctly the ways in which Trinidad was historically forged in

a crucible of violence which goes a long way toward explaining the endemic violence that persists today. She briefly documents the depraved and sustained levels of violence which decimated the original Amerindian population of Trinidad, followed by those inflicted during slavery and finally those of indenture. What emerges is a picture of violence inflicted by the empowered against the disempowered at such levels that it could not but re-emerge in a parallel violence of the people against themselves. The systematic dismantling and undermining of the family under slavery, the violence of African-Indian relations under indenture, and the violence of Indian men against their women, the intra-racial violence which flourished especially in the cities and especially in the context of steelband rivalry in the early twentieth century, and the consistency of violence perpetrated against children even by their families, all indicate how 'violence' has indeed 'bred violence' in the Trinidad and Tobago context. If a more peaceful way of living has characterized Tobago, despite a similarly violent history, Brereton indicates that this is because of a pastoral community style of living and a strong Christian ethos which has been challenged in recent years as the smaller island also gradually succumbs to a measure of violence unprecedented in its earlier history.

There has been little written on the ways in which male abusers see themselves and their difficulties with their female partners. Jennifer Holder-Dolly and Valerie Youssef address this significant gap in a paper that analyses discursively extracts from a focus group discussion among six male abusers in Trinidad who have undergone counselling and remediation. The paper examines three major areas that the male discussion addresses: the ways in which they see their positions vis-a-vis their women and the wider society, their perceptions of their roles in domestic violence including why they abuse and their responses to the infidelity of their partners, perceived or real. The study shows that they perceive themselves as marginalized and misunderstood by society in contrast to women whom they see as strongly supported. While they make suggestions for mutual support these are only interim measures and they have no real advice to give younger men but rather use avoidance strategies, self-exoneration and defensiveness. They have a unidimensional view of women, do not seem to see a way forward to positive relationships, and are unable to express exactly what they want or need. Their vulnerability, isolation and incapacity to find meaningful solutions are instructive to social workers, psychologists, case workers and others who can use analyses of this nature to build empathy and to inform the design of counselling programmes geared to offer support and pose meaningful resolution to those who perpetrate abuse.

Professor Gordon Rohlehr's paper focuses on the calypso 'The Equalizer' sung by Singing Sandra in the 1998 calypso season, as his base for discussing in considerable detail the era of violence through which Trinidad and Tobago passed in the 1980's and 1990's, and how this was dealt with in society at large and through calypso. He makes the profound point that The Equalizer (based on the television series of the same name) prescribes the most extreme violent reprisals against men for their crimes of rape, murder and abuse of women but in itself reduces the situation to one of a balance of terror which can benefit none. He notes that the calypso is by no means unique in the stance it takes, either within this genre or in society at large, but he illustrates powerfully through a discussion of the activities of the vigilante groups set up by Hulsie Bhaggan in Central

Trinidad in the mid-nineties, that such solutions only rebound on themselves, creating a pandemic of violence which is uncontrollable, given its nature and the kinds of persons it attracts to its cause. He makes the point also that Bhaggan created a race war which was to a large extent unwarranted since much of the violence against Indian women came from Indian family members generally and particularly from a group of marauding Indian rapists who so understood the power of racist ideologies in creating a dynamic of terror that they masked themselves in rastafarian wigs. He noted the fact that the violence ultimately spanned every kind of human relationship in the context of an interrelated web of violence, a culture of violence without limit, and beyond the capacity of the state to control. More than any other paper in this Issue, this one demonstrates in profound detail how deeply Trinidad and Tobago society has become permeated by this scourge. He ends on a note of some hope though, citing calypsoes which advocate mutual understanding and gender and ethnic reconciliation: "In the end the struggle has to be relocated in the theatre of the human heart and the eye must see beyond the perspective of a balance of terror."

In "No Money, No Love" Paula Morgan also examines calypsos including The Equalizer, as well as ranging through a recent press article and Caribbean literature as she explores the role that poverty plays in the cycle of violence and abuse which characterizes society. She notes the ways in which an implicit view of the rights of the male in the home continues to pervade even our most recent media articles on family violence, and in addition, an acceptance of the failure of the social services to provide any support when called upon to do so. These inadequacies compound a situation of the most extreme stress for females in impoverished situations, but seem to be accepted as part of the impoverished woman's burden. As she ranges through the recorded agonies of both male and female experiences of poverty down through the twentieth century, she demonstrates how gender inequities become more explosive in the crucible of poverty and social disadvantage. It is as if the impoverished environment undermines and destabilizes, calls forth blame and mutual recrimination, and exacerbates a cycle of family violence which is the more heinous because the social condition seems accepted and self-perpetuating.

Geraldine Skeete gives a telling and succinct overview of some of the works of Caribbean fiction which deal with homophobic attitudes and violence, verbal, emotional and physical, which are meted out to persons suspected of being homosexual. She explains this homophobic trait in the Caribbean man, as deriving not just from the Biblical perspective but, perhaps more pervasive in its effect, the intense hypermasculinity that the Caribbean male feels he has to espouse, having been emasculated himself by his violent and systematic sexual and psychic undermining during slavery. She indicates how homosexuality remains an illegal act in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as elsewhere in the Caribbean, and notes that homosexuals and disabled persons are lumped together with criminals in their exclusion from society. Drawing on the works of Shani Mootoo and Lawrence Scott, she demonstrates in particular the isolation and condemnation in which the potentially homosexual child grows up, as he/she is flagrantly abused in both home and school; but she does not stop there, examining the violence of marital relationships in which lesbianism intervenes, as well as the violence meted out to adult homosexual couples and the clandestine nature of their

activity, short or long term, as they negotiate a hostile world. Skeete shows how these fictive accounts are most significant for "unsilencing…the problem of a culture of violence against non-heterosexuals in the Caribbean".

David Plummer and Stephen Geofroy deal with the same issue of homophobia but through their analysis of interviews with young men interviewed throughout the Caribbean in research undertaken by Plummer while UNESCO HIV/Aids Professor at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, This research highlights the pressure put on young males growing up, to conform to the accepted standards of hegemonic masculinity or fall foul of homophobic abuse. They show, in particular, how the capacity for violence is prescribed by the peer group as a requisite demonstration of masculinity and that the very failure to participate fully in this culture of violence may lead directly to accusations of homosexuality or femininity and to violent reprisal. Pressure to conform to the peer group is cited as a major cause of violence among young males, particularly in the absence of other kinds of male role model, which might foster alternative and more positive exemplars.

The brief Dialogue by Merle Hodge focuses specifically on the Caribbean tradition of meting out violence toward children and indicates very clearly the element of hypocrisy entailed in society's responsiveness to child abuse. There is clearly an issue here as to what level of violence constitutes abuse and whether there is justification for any form of corporal punishment to children, given the capacity for its misuse.

In addition to the six full essays and the brief polemic dialogue, a number of creative works on Violence are included. There is also a Tribute to Estella Scott, a martyr to the cause of violence against women who was murdered in the Cayman Islands at age 33 after eight years of intense advocacy for gender equality and the rights of women to remove themselves from abusive situations. This piece has been written by Marilyn Connolly. We are pleased to include this tribute to Estella, in particular, since it stands as a testimony to the uncompromising and heroic way in which she upheld right in a society which would rather hide its sores and mask its inadequacies. Her work is continued through the Estella Scott-Roberts Foundation and the Cayman Islands Crisis Centre. A Book Review by Barbara Lalla of Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence in Caribbean Discourse is also included as this text is the root of this project and it has a pedagogical application since it has enabled us to establish a first interdisciplinary course on Gender, Trauma and Violence in Discourse at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

The creative works comprise Rhoda Bharath's short story: "Before I Dead", three poems by Jennifer Rahim—"Washing Dishes with a Crab in the Sink", "There Will be Time Enough for Laughter" and "The Secret of Fruit-bearing Trees"; and a short video, "Ketch Dis: Envisioning Alternatives to Gender-Based Violence in the Caribbean", produced by Gabrielle Hosein with an accompanying explication. "Ketch Dis", in the words of its creator, depicts symbolically how "an awareness of…rights, choices, selfhood and belonging may be denied. It also refers to consciousness of alternatives to an unjust social order". It is a brief word music video that effectively crystallizes feminist perspectives on gender, patriarchy and violence in a Caribbean world space. Additionally, Marrielle Barrow's visual representations complement the whole by demonstrating symbolically the colours and tinctures, shapes and depths, shades and shadows of the

darkness of violence.

It is often the case that raw violence and its effects can be better represented through creative evocations of them than by any factual depictions since they enable the writer to represent not just those harsh facts but, more important, imaginaries, symbolisms, representations and feelings relative to them. Who else can represent the entrapment not just of the body but of the soul, entailed in the sustained victimization of those who are systematically abused over an extended period? Rahim captures that reality symbolically in her first poem. Who can effectively speak of an ultimate redemption within this life or beyond it for the child victims of the most extreme abuse imaginable? She achieves this in her second. Who else can represent the feelings of the potential criminally violent youth who ultimately, like so many others beside him, becomes the victim? Bharath works this through in effective and insightful detail in her short story.

All in all, we believe that this Issue deals effectively with some of the major issues that have perpetuated a Culture of Violence in Trinidad and Tobago as well as in the wider Caribbean region, and does so through a variety of effective discussions and creative depictions which bring breadth and depth to our understandings of the complex issues entailed. We perceive it as a further step in our movement towards the understanding and eradication of this phenomenon since it is only through self-examination that remediation can be recommended and healing achieved. We are still only beginning the process and look forward to the further discussion and action which this work will provoke.

<u>REFERENCES</u>

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