

Bustling across the Canada-US Border: Gender and the Remapping of the Caribbean across Place

D. Alissa Trotz

The term *transnational*, once heavily associated in scholarly debates in the region with capital flows across national borders (dependency theory, New World debates), proliferates today across a wide array of institutional and disciplinary sites. One way in which it has been taken up is in discussions of the networks developed by diasporic populations that link geographically distinct places. While this literature offers rich studies of the embodied transgression of territorial boundaries, empirical investigations in the social sciences have largely tended to be preoccupied with the relations sustained between “origin”/ “home”/ “departure” and “destination”/ “away”/ “settlement” societies.¹ This binary emphasis has arguably restricted our comprehension of the complexity of transnational practices that connect people not just with the place they left but also across sites of migration. This is notwithstanding the early

¹ See, for instance, the influential typology in José Itzigsohn, Carlos D. Cabral, Esther Hernández-Medina, and Obed Vázquez, “Mapping Dominican Transnationalism: Narrow and Broad Transnational Practices,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 316–39. For an important counterbalance to this in the Caribbean scholarship, see Charles V. Carnegie, *Post-nationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); and Karen Fog Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys: An Ethnography of Migration and Home in Three Family Networks* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

recognition of a transnational social field that connects *at least* two societies.² For instance, Orlando Patterson notes that Caribbean culture is to be “found partly in New York, partly in Florida and to a lesser extent in Toronto. . . . People move freely between these different locations while remaining within the transnational community, and they move at all levels.” But he does not pursue this observation, leaving open the question of what these movements consist of or their significance for thinking about the space of the Caribbean.³

A promising discussion that centers these other journeys is Rinaldo Walcott’s innovative effort to reformulate Canada and Canadian identity from the standpoint of those he describes as “living residency with urgency”:

Caribbean popular culture in Canada is lodged between the continuing relations of Canadian proximity to the United States and, simultaneously, an imagined and real relation to the region of the Caribbean. . . . The tension here is that the Caribbean in Canada can be as easily accessed through New York or Miami as it is directly from the region.⁴

Walcott’s rerouting of Caribbean popular culture precisely follows the “diasporic itineraries” I want to track in this essay, in which the connections between Caribbean migration destinations—what Carmen Voigt-Graf refers to more generally as “diasporic nodes”—are foregrounded as the analytical point of departure.⁵ The nodes at work here are Toronto—home to the majority of Anglophone Caribbean migrants—and New York, whose importance has been widely accepted as “a destination and place of residence for migrants and as an economic, cultural and social site of significance in the wider spectrum of movement characteristic of the Caribbean diaspora.”⁶

Drawing on the example of Caribbean women whose movement between Toronto and New York figures far more frequently than return visits to the region, this essay explores gendered and routinized modes of travel across sites that displace the home-away dyad. How might we explain these visits to Caribbean people in places *other* than the Caribbean and to Caribbean *places* in North America? How might we account for the prominence of women across these circuits? How do these sites relate to each other, and what might such gendered journeys offer to discussions of Caribbean culture and identity?

- 2 See Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Christine Szanton-Blanc, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992). Literary and cultural studies approaches have been far more innovative and imaginative in this regard; for an excellent and early contribution, see Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 3 Orlando Patterson, “Reflections on the Caribbean Diaspora and Its Policy Implications,” in Kenneth Hall and Denis Benn, eds., *Contending with Destiny: The Caribbean in the Twenty-First Century* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000), 222–23. For a provocative critique that argues that transnational or diasporic communities are frequently invoked without empirical evidence justifying such a description, see Ghassan Hage, “A Not So Multi-sited Ethnography of a Not So Imagined Community,” *Anthropological Theory* 5, no. 4 (2005): 463–75.
- 4 Rinaldo Walcott, “Caribbean Pop Culture in Canada; or, The Impossibility of Belonging to the Nation,” *Small Axe*, no. 9 (March 2001): 123–39.
- 5 On diasporic itineraries, see Michaeline Crichlow, *Globalization and the Post-Creole Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). On diasporic nodes, see Carmen Voigt-Graf, “Towards a Geography of Transnational Spaces: Indian Transnational Communities in Australia,” *Global Networks* 4, no. 1 (2004): 25–49.
- 6 Karen Fog Olwig, “New York as a Locality in a Global Family Network,” in Nancy Foner, ed., *Islands in the City: West Indian Migration to New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 142.

The research on which this discussion is based was carried out among Caribbean-identified women based in Toronto who travel regularly to New York. Their journeys have prompted and been greatly enabled by the emergence of chartered buses that make the trip every weekend, organized predominantly by Caribbean women and targeting a Caribbean clientele. Beginning in the summer of 2003, I began to track and compile a list of advertisements for bus tours in local community newspapers in Toronto. Over the following year I conducted interviews over the phone with ten tour operators, and followed up with five in-depth interviews that focused on the trips and their popularity among members of the Caribbean community. I also visited several of the pick-up points around Toronto on the days that the buses were leaving, including long-weekend trips and day excursions. Finally, I have gone on several of the tours to Brooklyn and to the shopping outings, interacting and speaking with travelers, and on each occasion spending the day with a select group of passengers.

Caribbean Itineraries

It is 5:45 a.m. on a Saturday morning. Close to two hundred people, the bulk of them women and a few children, and almost all African-Caribbean, stand outside of a strip mall. Although it is mid-August, the brisk morning wind reminds us that fall is around the corner, and causes a lineup for coffee at the McDonald's restaurant. This is clearly a weekly event and the management has realized it can do brisk business by opening its doors unusually early. At 6:00 a.m. buses begin to arrive. A few women stand around with checklists, urging passengers to take their seats. By 6:45 all the buses are full, and pull slowly out of the parking lots. Destination: New York.

Busloads of people leaving Canada every weekend, heading for the American border—for many this is now a regular, unremarkable dimension of Caribbean life in Toronto. No one seems sure when the trips began (“It been around for as long as I could remember”), but the earliest memories are of the late 1970s (one woman spoke of visiting her sister and taking her three-year-old daughter in 1976, but rarely was anyone, including those running the tours, this precise with dates). The general consensus seemed to be that the September Caribbean Labor Day Parade on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn was the impetus for a few enterprising women to charter buses to take people from Toronto to play mas’ across the border, and the bus business continues to be run mainly by women, catering largely to a female traveling clientele.⁷ As it soon became clear that passengers were using the annual opportunity to connect with networks of family and friends, and were desirous of going on a more regular basis, trips throughout the year were added, leaving Toronto on a Friday evening and returning in the early hours of Monday morning so as not to interrupt a regular work week. Other options are

7 A recent study of Caribbean diaspora cricket has found that annual visiting matches between US- and Canada-based teams result in cross-border bus tours in which men are highly visible (women also go as supporters and use the opportunity to connect with family and friends). See Janelle Joseph, “Cricket as a Diasporic Resource for Caribbean-Canadians” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2010).

now available: leaving on Thursday and returning on Sunday (or Monday, on holiday weekends), as well as a longer trip that departs on Tuesday. The frame of reference for these tours is multilayered, with different temporalities jostling for attention: from significant Caribbean events to Canadian and American holidays that provide a three- or four-day holiday weekend.

Given that migration and movement are central dimensions of Caribbean sensibilities,⁸ it is perhaps not surprising that forms of public transit—the bus, airplane, subway—should feature prominently in literary and other representations of the Caribbean diasporic experience. Thus for Dionne Brand, Bathurst subway was “like a sign of home” because of “the people who passed through it” on their way to a downtown space bustling with a Caribbean bookstore, barbershops, restaurants, the Thursday night dance, the jukebox at Wong’s restaurant, and the United Negro Improvement Association Hall. It was the center of Toronto’s black community (even before the wave of black Caribbean migrants arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, Brand suggests), after Canada’s replacement of explicitly racist immigration policies by a points system inaugurated a new wave of migrants from the region, at the same time that the United Kingdom selectively fortified its own borders through the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962.⁹ Jennifer Burman describes the multisensory experience of riding the Eglinton West Bus through a strip densely populated by Caribbean small businesses and homes, which inspires her nuanced discussion of diasporic public spheres in Toronto.¹⁰ The title of Luis Rafael Sánchez’s short story “The Flying Bus” reduces the distance and captures the ordinariness and subaltern travelers of the plane ride that “ferries every night between the airports of San Juan and New York.”¹¹

In Brand’s rendering, the subway is a subterranean register that provides an access point for buried histories and geographies, interrupting sanitized and compartmentalized state narratives of multiculturalism from below. For Burman, it is the smells and sounds of a Caribbeanized Eglinton Avenue that momentarily spill through the open windows of the bus caught in rush hour traffic. And while the Puerto Rican passengers in Sánchez’s story transform the liminal space of the plane—perfectly and humorously conveyed via the description of the escaped mangrove crabs patrolling the aisles, destined for a pot somewhere in New York—this is done in the face of and despite an uncomprehending and “uniformly gringo” airline crew.¹² The buses and bus riders that form the basis for the story I want to tell below are also charting new geographies of belonging. Unlike the examples offered by Brand and Burman, and to a much greater extent than the frontier represented by Sánchez’s flying bus, where the distance

8 See Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, *Explanation in Caribbean Migration* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

9 Dionne Brand, *Bread out of Stone: Reflections on Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, and Politics* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1991), 27.

10 Jennifer Burman, “At the Scene of Many Crossroads: Diasporic Public Spheres in Toronto,” copublished in *Public* 22/23 (Toronto: Public Access, 2001), and Paul Moore and Meridith Risk, eds., *Culture of Cities* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic, 2001).

11 Luis Rafael Sánchez, “The Flying Bus,” in Asela Rodríguez de Laguna, ed., *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in Two World Contexts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1987), 17.

12 Sánchez, “The Flying Bus,” 18. There is of course another reading of the crabs’ destiny as symbolic of the frustrations and challenges and dead-end jobs that will be the real face of the American Dream for the Puerto Rican travelers, a reading echoed in this piece in the stories they swap on the plane.

between the passengers and the flying crew is pointedly articulated, these traveling spaces do not just commute between Caribbeanized worlds in Toronto and New York. A closer look at the work undertaken by the women who predominantly operate the tours reveals that the journey itself is self-consciously marked—and marketed—as a Caribbean experience in at least three distinct ways.

First, the tours differentiate themselves from other travel options as catering specifically to the itineraries of Caribbean folk. Points of departure on the Canadian side of the border are deliberately chosen to attract a Caribbean clientele, with passengers picked up at places that reflect where Caribbean populations reside. While Greyhound buses do make stops at the Scarborough Town Centre and in Mississauga, additional locations of the Caribbean tours—outside a designated strip mall, at the YMCA, at the front of a bank—demonstrate an easy familiarity with places that Caribbean people frequent as well as a willingness to add stops that are more convenient to them. On major holidays, pick-up points are transformed into temporary Caribbean bus terminals, like the scene at the Scarborough Town Centre on a Thursday and Friday evening before the Labor Day weekend in New York, where one might find as many as twenty-five to thirty buses waiting to depart (for this holiday, one woman has taken as many as seven buses, which leave Toronto on Thursday and Friday). Hundreds of people gather around, trying to find their buses, to confirm their names on a list, and to secure a good seat. An overbooked tour will try to squeeze passengers on another bus making the trip; meanwhile those traveling have their favorites: “They have early bus and late bus. They have party bus and quiet bus.”

Destinations are also key. When the tours first started, passengers saw them as the cheaper and faster route to New York. As Janice recalled,

[These buses were] much cheaper than Greyhound. . . . In the past, you could get a flight out of Buffalo for twenty-seven dollars. . . . But you find, by the time you take the bus over to Buffalo airport it used to take as much time or even longer. Because the cheap flights used to go to New Jersey. And when you get to New Jersey you got to get a bus to get to Brooklyn and then you have to take the train. So you found out that you could be on the road for twelve, thirteen, fourteen hours, you know. So you might as well take the bus.

Although the rates are now comparable—a nonrefundable roundtrip commercial bus ticket to New York costs about C\$100, whereas the Caribbean tours range in price from C\$100–\$140 for the longer trips—the latter have by now cultivated a loyal clientele. Moreover, price takes a backseat to convenience. Crucially, the established companies go to Manhattan, with the Port Authority bus terminal as the final destination. In contrast, the Caribbean charters cater to the travel plans of the vast majority of their passengers by heading directly to Brooklyn. According to many of the women I spoke with, this makes all the difference because it cuts out the hassle and extra time of having to navigate Manhattan. Most of the tours stop at the intersection known simply as Flatbush and Church, a central and bustling junction that registers for many as the heart of the Caribbean community in New York. Passengers descend the

steps of the bus on a Saturday morning to the sounds of the Caribbean coming to life: people on the street and coming up from the subway; a medley of accents from all around the region; greengrocers putting their produce out on the sidewalk; owners of discount clothing shops unfastening padlocks from doors and winding up shutters to welcome the first customers; the sign at the front of what looks like a store announcing that a church is located there; menus on restaurant doors advertising roti and curry, jerk chicken, doubles, and rice and peas, and serving up Saturday specialties like black pudding and souse; the smell of plait bread and pastries wafting through bakeries' open doors; dollar taxis depositing passengers and cramming more people in before they take off down Church Avenue, the artery through the Caribbean community. The buses from Canada have become a familiar Saturday morning sight, not just blending into but part of what makes this crossroads a diasporized Caribbean space.

Second, focusing only on the starting and end points of the trip—the collection and discharge of passengers—obscures the space in between. As one operator stated, “[We] don’t just drop you in Flatbush and go. . . . It’s an exclusive. It’s a tour. It’s not just a bus ride.” The Caribbean community is the primary target of advertisements that are strategically placed in Toronto’s Caribbean and black community newspapers (the column advertising between ten and twelve upcoming trips is a staple in the *Share* newspaper, a free weekly that is distributed through the dense network of Caribbean groceries, barbers, and hairdressers in Toronto, as well as in communities in Scarborough, Mississauga, and Brampton). Passengers are also recruited via word of mouth at church and other community events. The operators keep detailed records of past travelers, as the example below illustrates:

Orlean is in her mid-fifties, and migrated to Canada from Trinidad some thirty-five years ago. She got into the charter business some nine years ago. She operates from her home, where she proudly showed me a well-thumbed Rolodex with hundreds of names and phone numbers. Orlean organizes trips to Brooklyn on long holiday weekends, and also makes shorter one-day shopping runs to Detroit and Fort Erie, Pennsylvania.¹³ Buses leave for the weekend trips from downtown pick-up points around 7:00 on Thursday or Friday evenings and drive through the night to arrive in New York around 6:00 the next morning. The return trip departs New York at midday on Sunday or Monday, getting people to Toronto by 10:00 or 11:00 at night, in time for the after-holiday routine. As we talk, the phone rings, incessantly. Without skipping a beat, Orlean takes details for the Canadian Victoria Day and American Memorial Day weekends coming up a month away: *Your name, phone number? How many of you? When will you give me your deposit?* There is a brief back and forth over the question of whether a child should pay full fare. Orlean says she frequently overbooks, like airlines; that way she’s sure of a full bus. At any rate, she has her regulars, and they are sure not to let her down. If too many passengers turn up, there are always other charters that she can put people on. By the time our interview is finished, one and a half hours later, one of the buses for the first weekend is already three-quarters full and Orlean is thinking of chartering two.

13 Namely, the scene that opened this section; these trips will be discussed later in this essay.

Well-known operators like Orlean have extensive networks; she can rely on people calling her to find out when next she is traveling. Cultivating customer loyalty over time is key and involves keeping in touch with past passengers to inform them of upcoming trips and offering discounts and specials to groups and established customers. One passenger recalled that on one of the trips there was a minor accident. The operator called her when she returned, apologized, and offered her free passage for the next time; she has since only traveled with this bus tour. This is intense service work and was cited by all the people I spoke with as the primary reason for women's dominance of this sector ("You have to call people back, . . . treat them with kid gloves, you know? Women can do this better"; "I don't think men would have the patience").¹⁴

Finally, the bus passengers are not only almost entirely Caribbean; they are also likely to be passengers one has traveled with previously. As one woman noted, traveling as a group is also common: "Most know each other already because they book as a group. . . . This one book four, this one book four, this one book four. So very rarely do they book one-one." A trip confirms that what is going on is not so much a tour that takes Caribbean people from one diasporic site to another; rather, the buses are traveling spaces directly implicated in the production of Caribbeanness. Like Sánchez's flying bus, the Caribbean tour bus becomes a space of familiarity and sociality, a place to catch up with people one may not have seen for a while, to renew contacts, to share information and exchange stories. In fact, this was initially not just left to the passengers: the trips deliberately attempted to create a sense of community. Early memories were that "it used to be really fun; it was less a business and more like a bus ride." As one operator recalled,

I make it a concept of friendship. I want people to recognize other people. Not the people that they came with, because usually they might come in groups or they come with their own family. I used to do games, types of games that would introduce X to Y and B and so forth. They get up and go and meet their person, or at the end of the game, the person who knows the most people inside out, not their personal personal business you know, they would receive a gift. . . . So they did that, many of them got around, finding out oh where are you from? What you did, what you were, and so forth.

Some relationships initiated on the bus endure beyond the journey, as one passenger noted: "This is a very nice thing to do. I like meeting new people, meeting lots of people, . . . all kinds, you know. From Trinidad, Barbados, Jamaica, everywhere, and sometimes some of them stayed with me and my families, or my sister's place." Another woman remembered that when she first started making the trip over two decades ago, people hardly slept on the way: "It was jokes all the way down." In the words of Julie, a frequent traveler:

It's a way of meeting your own. Getting together with your own people, who you have not seen for years. . . . And it renews friendships and talk about home. Sometimes we show videos, too.

14 The one male operator I interviewed reiterated this sentiment, noting that his wife and sister did all the bookings and call-backs, because that was women's work.

. . . I have Guyanese tapes. I take that and I show it there and then somebody may bring one from Jamaica. They show Jamaican or they have Jamaican music or whatever. And there's a whole concept of the food. Some people, you're smelling curry in the back, . . . you're smelling jerk in the back, . . . somebody's saying you want to have some saltfish and such and such, and you're sharing, the concept is just . . . nice, yes.

These experiences, then, are what continue to deliver a regular stream of Caribbean passengers to Toronto pick-up points each weekend (as one passenger laughingly observed, "No, you can't do none of those things on the way on Greyhound!"). Despite the fact that the games and activities no longer appear to be regular features (many blamed the economic difficulties as well as the fact that it is now seen as more of a business and less of an excursion), the bus remains a point of connection and space of Caribbeanness, a constancy of identification that has enabled it to occasionally diversify destination points to other Caribbean communities and even beyond: Washington and Montreal; points in Florida; and even Nova Scotia. As we will see below, later additions that are the most popular among passengers involve weekend day-excursions to shop in upstate New York, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

At the same time, it should be noted that what is being produced here is a particular versioning of the Caribbean. The vast majority of the passengers on these trips are women of African-Caribbean heritage, but this does not mean that New York is any less significant for other Caribbeans in Toronto, in particular for the Indian-Caribbean diaspora. Their invisibility partly reflects the oral histories of the tour as originating in providing transportation for mas' players during the Labor Day weekend, and it is further reinforced by the itinerary of the weekly trips, which stop at Flatbush and Church in Brooklyn, a significant crossroads for the African-Caribbean diaspora. Indian-Caribbean spaces such as Richmond Hill and Jamaica, Queens, which are firmly established as sites of Indian-Caribbean migrant settlement and as Indian-Caribbean diasporic spaces,¹⁵ are not serviced by the buses, and so far there appears to be little sustained and direct outreach to these members of the community.¹⁶

Women Border-Crossing

Our comprehension of transnational movement has been enhanced by studies demonstrating that women and men differentially experience and participate in cross-border networks. These distinctions suggest we should not focus on movement at the expense of those who stay put or create false equivalences, the unevenness that geographer Doreen Massey reminds us to pay attention to and that she refers to as the power-geometry of time-space compression.¹⁷

15 An example of this is "Corentyne Boulevard," which Guyanese use instead of its official name—Liberty Avenue in Queens—to refer to its close imaginative identification with Indian-Guyanese from the county of Berbice (*Corentyne* is often used popularly as shorthand—both affirmatively and derisively—for Indianness).

16 The rendering of the Caribbean in Canada as uniformly of African heritage is fairly pervasive; up to 2001 even the Canadian Census made it impossible for anyone from the Caribbean to be anything other than "Black." This is also the case in other sites; see, for example, Steven Vertovec, "Indo-Caribbean Experience in Britain: Overlooked, Miscategorized, Misunderstood," in Winston James and Clive Harris, eds., *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain* (London: Verso, 1993).

17 See Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

In the context of Caribbean debates, Mary Chamberlain, in an analysis of migrant oral histories, has argued that whereas masculinities tended to revolve around notions of success that emphasized autonomy, women were more likely to describe themselves in relation to familial obligations.¹⁸ These responsibilities—which for African-Caribbean women historically have never been seen as incompatible with paid work outside the home—do not diminish with migration, and in fact they significantly shape such decisions to the extent that female migration is often characterized as a strategy to maintain or improve the situation of families, even if in structural terms members are physically separated by national borders within a transnational social field.¹⁹

The continued identification of the household as a feminized spatial domain in the diaspora, then, helps to account for the popularity of the trips and the prominence of women on the Toronto–New York bus tours. These are profoundly gendered strands of connection, generated out of unequal expectations related to domesticity. If the bulk of the empirical work on remittances has amply demonstrated their importance as a household strategy that links families in the geographic space of the Caribbean to members living outside of it, what we see here are familiar and familial networks that exceed a home-away focus. Women's responses to my queries to identify all the countries and places where family members resided reveal a transnational sensibility in which various diasporic nodes are put into play.²⁰ One woman named seven sisters and one brother, six of whom live in Toronto and New York, with two siblings remaining in the Caribbean. Another traveler, in response to a question about family that she was close to, began by listing relatives—including her husband's family—in Brooklyn and Queens, and in New Jersey. Asked about how often they returned to the Caribbean, several women said it was expensive to "go back" except for special occasions or unanticipated events, while for many others it was seen as no longer necessary, since most relatives lived abroad. One woman commented wryly that when she goes to New York she has difficulty deciding which family member to stay with, but when she returns to the Caribbean she has to rely on distant cousins or friends for accommodation; for her, New York has in significant ways become a more familiar Caribbean space. This is somewhat like the woman in Sánchez's short story who says simply "from New York" when asked which town in Puerto Rico she is from.²¹

In a discussion of black migratory subjectivities, Carole Boyce Davies's description of her own mother easily applies here: "She also lives in that in-between space that is neither here nor there, locating herself in the communities where her children, grandchildren, family and friends reside."²² Women described the primary purpose of their Brooklyn trips as visiting

18 Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

19 This pattern is also consistent with studies of feminized migration from other regions of the world. For instance, see Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); and Saskia Sassen, "Women's Burden: Counter-geographies of Globalization and the Feminisation of Survival," *Journal of International Affairs* 53, no. 2 (2000): 503–24.

20 Also see Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys*.

21 Sánchez, "The Flying Bus," 25.

22 Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, 1.

family members and friends or attending significant events, with a level of involvement and commitment that clearly suggested that the work of maintaining active kinship networks fell primarily to them, in various gendered kinship roles as mothers, daughters, siblings, and in-laws (from taking a leading role in helping to organize a wedding or other special occasion to going down to visit an ailing family member and assist with the housework). In a few instances, children were brought back to be looked after in Toronto during the summer holidays, returning to New York on the buses in time for the start of the school year. These are not just occasional visits, like the family reunions that one saves up for and organizes in meticulous detail.²³ They represent spatialized practices, embodied movements, and repeat journeys that are characterized by regularity, even ordinariness, shrinking the distance between noncontiguous spaces. A common pattern is represented by one passenger with family remaining in the Caribbean and with close friends and relatives in the United States. Asked how often she had returned to the Caribbean in the past year, her answer was once (to Trinidad and Tobago), but in reply to a question about how frequently she visits her relatives outside of Canada, she took some time to recall her various trips (seven or eight), most of which were oriented around specific familial events.

This routinization derives primarily from the fact that these journeys have been folded into a transnational, gendered household strategy, underlining the importance of attending to what Karen Fog Olwig and Nina Nyberg Sørensen refer to as “mobile livelihoods,” shifting “the analytical focus from place to mobility, and from an overdetermined emphasis on ‘place of origin’ and ‘place of destination’ to a more open-ended exploration of the movements involved in sustaining a livelihood.”²⁴ Kinwork for these travelers involved a repertoire of activities not confined to visiting relatives and friends or attending events on the American side of the border. For all the women on the trips to Brooklyn that I accompanied, shopping for one’s household had become an inextricable part of the journey. Women traveled with lists of items, working their way through them by a combination of purchases and contributions from the relatives they went to visit. In Canada, it was a common sight to see them arriving at the pick-up points with extra empty bags or suitcases, which were fully packed when the women returned a few days later (another advantage over flying: there is no restriction to the weight or number of bags one can bring on the buses): “With the amount of baggage they come with, you know they need household stuff. Or they could be buying to send home, you know? To the Caribbean.”

This gendered division of labor that relates to the symbolic as well as material dimensions of familial maintenance explains the overwhelmingly female composition of the bus

23 See, for example, Connie Sutton, “Celebrating Ourselves: The Family Reunion Rituals of African Caribbean Transnational Families,” *Global Networks* 4, no. 3 (2004): 243–57.

24 See Karen Fog Olwig and Nina Nyberg Sørensen, “Mobile Livelihoods: Making a Living in the World,” in Karen Fog Olwig and Nina Nyberg Sørensen, eds., *Work and Migration: Life and Livelihoods in a Globalizing World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–19.

tours. Women described themselves as extremely resourceful at meeting household needs and stretching the domestic budget, and with the kind of detail simply not expected of men:

Let me tell you why is mostly women [who] travel. Men may not try, and they don't want to think women are very strategic with money. Women are. Because women know how to plan. Women know when to buy. Women know the deals and the quality. So women are more able, especially women who have families and children.

For women living on their own or in difficult domestic situations, the trips were also described as offering an important option:

Well, we go not only to see family but to shop, and many of these women haven't got a husband or nothing. . . . It is a lot of single women. Or they have women too with husbands, but I hear stories where they say my husband doesn't give me anything and is I only have to do it all.

Border-Crossing as Household Strategy

In her discussion of the feminization of Caribbean migration, Christine Ho describes a phenomenon whereby women "exploit resources in many locations, making [the household] less vulnerable to any single national economy and allowing it to triumph over dependency."²⁵ It would soon become clear that while familial connections were the initial impulse for travel between Toronto and New York, meeting household needs was also a crucial part of the visits; in fact, for some this would become the main reason for traveling. Sensing new opportunities, several operators sought new ways of tapping into this potential market. While the Brooklyn trip remains a staple, weekend day-trips to upstate New York (mainly Buffalo); Fort Erie, Pennsylvania; and even occasionally Detroit were added and are now regular features of the Caribbean cross-border tours. Dates are advertised in advance and particular times of year are popular and well known for extended hours and sales, such as US Thanksgiving, Labor Day, and Christmas, and the back-to-school season.

This pattern sheds light on why these routinized Caribbean trips go in one direction, from Toronto to New York. Bus tours in the opposite direction are more exceptional and annual events, such as for the Caribana festival that takes place at the end of July. At first glance this might appear strange given that Toronto is home to a significant Caribbean community with established and bustling neighborhoods (Eglinton; the Jane-Finch corridor; parts of Scarborough, Mississauga, Brampton, and other areas), raising the rather obvious question, Why are family members in New York not reciprocating the visits with similar regularity?

Deborah Thomas has usefully drawn on Inderpal Grewal's discussion of the circulation of the American Dream around the world (and in which the consuming subject occupies a privileged place) to highlight the fact that Jamaican women working as temporary hotel workers in Michigan "already had a mediated experience of 'America' [even prior to arriving]; they did

²⁵ Christine Ho, "The Internationalization of Kinship and the Feminization of Caribbean Migration: The Case of Afro-Trinidadian Immigrants in Los Angeles," *Human Organization* 52, no. 1 (1993): 9.

not need to be in 'America' to know it."²⁶ The idea of "America" was also compelling for the Caribbean women in this study who now make their homes in Canada, and while none of the travelers I spoke with exhibited any desire to uproot themselves yet again and relocate, all saw access to the other side of the border as important. New York is not simply an equivalent locality within a multistranded Caribbean social network. It occupies a privileged position, partly reflected in the fact that among Caribbean communities outside the United States, "New York" and "America" are frequently used interchangeably. For these women, the existence of friends and family, combined with proximity and accessibility (a ten-hour bus ride away), move America/New York from the realm of the imagination to the domain of the possible. As one passenger succinctly stated when I asked her opinion on why busloads of American-based passengers were not coming to Toronto every week, "What does Toronto have to offer? You go to New York and you can get some bargains. . . . I mean, the fashion is different, you get something different or you got most of your relatives living there. There's always something happening in New York. . . . It is different and it's more affordable."

The transnational excursions to outlet stores are even more heavily female-dominated; for instance, on one visit to Fort Erie for the Canadian Victoria Day holiday in May, I counted four men (all thirty or younger) out of a total of fifty-six passengers that included teenage girls, single mothers, and older women (there were few young children, in contrast to the Brooklyn tours, reflecting the different orientation of these trips). There was a clear gendered division of labor, in that the women (with the exception of the teenagers) tended to shop not just for themselves but mainly for their households and extended networks of family and kin, while the men purchased items that seemed to be primarily for themselves.

Women represented their border-crossing as a household strategy through which one could make ends meet in Toronto, particularly in the context of economic downturn: "Things are expensive in Toronto, as you know, if you working for a minimum wage. . . . People who have house, losing their job and things are real tough. . . . So what they do is really go across the border and buy these things." New York was described as cheaper (especially with a strengthening Canadian dollar) and as the land of bargains, impressions no doubt reinforced by the routes deliberately chosen to appeal to budget-conscious travelers: outlet and strip malls, dollar and thrift stores, and flea markets. Narratives of economic necessity, however, existed alongside other reasons for going. Women talked about being able to find items that were unavailable or not yet in fashion in Toronto, as well as having wider choices at better prices, highlighting the significance of American consumer culture in shaping the preferences and imaginations of these weekly shoppers.

26 Deborah A. Thomas "Wal-Mart, Katrina, and Other Ideological Tricks: Jamaican Hotel Workers in Michigan," *Feminist Review* 90 (2008): 72. See also Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

A number of strategies have been identified for Jamaican temporary hotel workers in Michigan to “accomplish their consumerist goals,” including putting goods on layaway, identifying items and waiting for the prices to drop over the summer, and knowing exactly when particular stores would have sales.²⁷ This resourcefulness was on display on my first trip to upstate New York: it was immediately clear who the regulars were, familiar with the route and knowing in advance which stores they wanted to save their money for. We left at about 9:00 in the morning, and over the course of the day visited five places (one large mall, one dollar store, two outlet shops, and a plaza where the bus stopped at Marshall’s, a popular discount department store that at the time had no locations in Toronto). The women I spoke with had fixed budgets, and cash transactions were most common. Purchases were mainly of clothing, toiletries, bathroom and kitchen items, and occasionally small electronics. We traveled in mid-August, and most people seemed to be taking advantage of the back-to-school sales. Newcomers were given tips on the best places to shop. At each stop we were told how much time we had before the bus departed, making it clear why everyone wanted to sit close to the door. At busy stores one woman might keep a spot in the checkout line while her friends found what they wanted, with the favor returned at another store in which she had a particular interest. A few borrowed money from their friends when they ran short over the course of the day, and in one case a woman told me she was traveling with the money she received from the boxhand (informal savings) group she was part of. More-experienced passengers had packed their own food and refreshments, which they consumed between stops; this way they didn’t waste precious time finding lunch and could concentrate on shopping. The trips between stores were full of laughter and conversation among the women, comparing prices and goods purchased, and producing a feminized space with a clear sense of community in relation to gendered consumption practices. As one of the women noted,

Well, the women do it because . . . they like to chat and they talk about things and if a man is there he would feel very out of place. I mean, when they’re going on the shopping [trip], it’s who shopped for what and they’re taking out their things and they’re showing what they bought, even undies, they’re showing, . . . and the men wouldn’t like to see that.

As we returned, close to fourteen hours later, almost everyone was fast asleep, and it was clear just how much these circuits form part of a transnationalized domestic strategy in which cross-border consumption practices are inextricably interwoven with the imperatives of social reproduction.²⁸

Some women have also used the trips as an informal mechanism through which they can augment their income, bringing America back in their suitcases to sell to people who do

27 Thomas, “Wal-Mart,” 75.

28 For an excellent elaboration of this argument, critical of analyses of consumption that elide questions of (re)production, see Thomas, “Wal-Mart.” Also see Rachel Silvey, “Consuming the Transnational Family: Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers to Saudi Arabia,” *Global Networks* 6, no. 1 (2006): 23–40.

not travel (or go regularly): "Things real tough . . . and it expensive here, to live here it very expensive. So what people do . . . is really go across the border . . . to buy things to bring back to sell . . . they get a better profit. When you buy it here you don't get a profit." A typical example is Anna, a fifty-four-year-old woman and single parent who has been going to New York for over twenty-five years; she worked at night in a nursing home and began to make an additional livelihood from the occasional upstate shopping excursion. She says that this way she was able to save, but also that it enabled her to stand on her own two feet and not have to be dependent on a man. She traveled regularly to visit family and friends in Brooklyn but folded her informal economic activities into these trips as well. Over the years she developed connections in Harlem and Lower Manhattan through which she was given wholesale prices for items that she was purchasing in retail quantities—bags, clothing, hosiery, small household goods—for a primarily female Caribbean clientele in Toronto. She prided herself on being able to bargain, on having a good eye for finding things "there" that are not easily available "here" (at one point Anna specialized in sheer pantyhose for her Caribbean clients, since it was difficult to get the tones, quality, and prices in Toronto), and occasionally took special orders from people. Sometimes she found new customers on the bus. She described herself as taking pleasure in how she dressed, creating a role for herself as an arbiter of style, someone who received the kinds of comments on her outfits that invariably led to orders ("People would always say, 'Whenever we see Anna, she's always wearing something different. You will never see someone here wearing the same thing'"). When I visited her home Anna showed me items that were available in Toronto but which she had purchased in New York at a fraction of the price. As she explained,

At one point, sometimes I used to be in New York every other week. Every other weekend, because I had a clientele that I catered for. People would see the stuff I had and even now, people ask me, "Why don't you get back into the business?" I used to run a boutique out of my house. . . . I [would] go to the Garment District [in New York] and pick up stuff wholesale and come back here and sell it, and the same stuff I would see selling in some places in Toronto for exorbitant amounts.²⁹

If at first glance these trips appear to displace the focus to the diasporic Caribbean, the region in fact reappears as part of the circuit that underpins the transnational family network. Many of the women collect goods not just for their households in Toronto but for other family members living elsewhere, as in the case of another passenger, Leila, who regularly sends money and special gifts she picks up on her outings to her mother in England, as well as to a sister and her family in Guyana. In Leila's home, a barrel sits in a corner of her kitchen or living room. It has become part of the furniture, with letters, keys, scarves, and bric-à-brac thrown on its cover. A few local sale purchases make it into the barrel, but the content is almost entirely the result of travels to New York. It is a gradual process, with each trip yielding

29 Anna no longer buys and sells regularly, citing the hassle of travel and the fact that she no longer supports her daughter, now in her twenties and living on her own.

more items added to the growing pile of goods—soap, towels, clothes, shoes, candles, clock radios, canned foods. Once the barrel is full, it is sealed and shipped to the Caribbean, with the company that comes to collect it bringing an empty one to take its place, and Leila begins the process all over again. On average she sends two barrels to the Caribbean each year.³⁰

Repeated crossings do not, however, render the state irrelevant in structuring the terms of belonging. US-border practices bluntly reveal the limits to an analytical approach that might exaggerate diaspora's transgressive capacity to circumvent these restrictions. This became particularly clear in the post-9/11 period, which resulted initially in significant delays at the Niagara-Buffalo border (the route used by all the buses). In March 2003 new visa regulations were introduced that, with very few countries exempted, required landed immigrants in Canada (including those from the Caribbean) to obtain a visitor's visa to travel to the United States. When the announcement was first made, the public was warned that obtaining the visa could take weeks; the US consulate currently advises that one should budget ample travel time in advance, and that it takes an average of thirty-one days to get an interview (with another few days if the visa is granted without further paperwork needed). This has made it extremely difficult for Caribbean residents in Canada to travel freely back and forth as before and has also added an extra layer of cost (roughly US\$140), so that only those Caribbeans who are now Canadian citizens or those with visas can make the spontaneous and regular decision to travel.³¹

Delays at the border are also a frequent complaint. This is especially true of the shopping excursions, where passengers are anxious to avoid what they consider to be punitive duties on their purchases. On one such trip in late August two years ago, as our bus was pulled over at the border, passengers reminded each other, "Just answer them promptly. Remember, we just want to get home." As we waited in tense silence, the woman sitting next to me said softly, "I am so tired. Like I could never get used to this." She had worked a sixteen-hour shift the day before coming on the bus trip to purchase school clothes for her nine-year-old son. Eventually everyone was asked to disembark, taking everything with them. The bus was minutely searched, leading people to speculate quietly that the recent media discussions about the prevalence of guns in Toronto, coupled with high homicide rates among young black men in the city, made the bus a prime target to be stopped. It would be two hours before we were cleared to proceed, leaving another three buses at the border. This example stands as a stark reminder of how fraught border spaces are, underlining the necessity of specifying the ways in which they differentiate, assigning and confining people to/in place.

30 On average an empty jumbo barrel costs about C\$50; shipping to Guyana is about C\$70 (more, if one opts to pay the customs fees in Canada).

31 One does not know whether one will even receive a single- or multiple-entry visa to the United States. I was told that there was much uncertainty about the long-term effect of these new and restrictive policies, but while demand appeared initially to drop off, it has resumed to the extent that the weekly tours continue. On one trip I took with fifty-six others, three were landed immigrants, and one was a visitor to Canada from Trinidad and Tobago with a US visa.

Reflections

That's just us making our way home.

—Dionne Brand, *Bread out of Stone*

The transnational bus tours present us with an example of Caribbean lives that are sustained, nourished, and reproduced through the dynamics of crossing. These individuals move because they must, in order to make ends meet; to visit family and friends; attend celebrations, events, and funerals; hunt for bargains—in short, to make a life for themselves as Caribbeans “up North.” What are we to make of these routinized trips to Caribbean elsewhere, the relations across Caribbean diasporic space that for so many have become the mode of “return” to the region (at the very least, a more easily accessed trip)? What does it mean to name or lay claim to “Caribbean” where the transnational routes so deftly navigated do not regularly encounter a region so easily fixed in geographical, cartographic space?

Perhaps we should begin with a cautionary note, recognizing that “travel not be always read as involving a loosening of connections, a footlooseness that makes the idea of originary location redundant.”³² If we begin with our protagonists, the women whose lives involve border-crossing as a matter of routine, it is the kinship ties that emerge as the anchor that holds the story, and lives lived, firmly in place. It is an abiding sense of familial regimes, led by African-Caribbean women for whom motherhood and paid work are historically compatible, that generates these translocal and gendered strands of connection, blurring private and public, local and outer-national space. Paradoxical as it may seem, domesticity is conducted through transnational modalities, establishing different nodes of neighborliness between families stretched across the Toronto–New York divide.³³ Nor, as we have seen, does this render the space of the region irrelevant. While researchers have clearly established—through their study of remittances—the transnational connections that connect Caribbean households to migrant destinations, here it is the ongoing cross-border journeys of already migrated family members, and the centrality of women in particular, that facilitates the maintenance of these forms of material support.

Locating these journeys temporally and spatially is key. Rather than see this simply or only as a specific manifestation of a more general contemporary pattern, I agree with those who emphasise instead the *historicity* of displacement and emplacement as constitutive of the modern Caribbean and Caribbean sensibilities.³⁴ Historicizing the travels of the women in this study reveals just how “normal” these practices are. Antecedents to the livelihood strategies of the Toronto-based Caribbean women are the higglers/hucksters, African-Caribbean women who have historically kept families together and provided for their communities. Among their

32 Crichlow, *Globalization and the Post-Creole Imagination*, 138.

33 Thanks to Ato Quayson for supplying this helpful phrase.

34 Sidney Mintz, “The Localization of Anthropological Practice: From Area Studies to Transnationalism,” *Critique of Anthropology* 18, no.2 (1998): 117–33. Also see Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s elegant formulation, “The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 19–42.

contemporary counterparts in the region are the island-hopping small traders whose “trans-border activities are institutionalized and routine—very much part of settled island life,”³⁵ as well as those who travel to other countries to make purchases that are both consumed by them and sold to supplement low wages and insecure employment.

And yet it would be a mistake to characterize this as simply a repetition of well-worn routines, for we stand to lose seeing these practices simultaneously on their own terms. These translocal familial strategies constitute a historically inflected spatial practice that takes some not so expected routes (we are literally not referring to the same old stomping ground here), whether we are talking about the innovative strategies of the bus operators, who have led the way in institutionalizing these tours as a commonplace of the Caribbean scene in Toronto; the multiple income-generating strategies that are clearly a regular part of life; the persistence of the bus trips in the face of increasingly stringent and differentiated border controls; or the in-transit camaraderie of the female space of the bus, which makes this more than just work.

The women who run the trips rely on Caribbean identity-making practices that necessarily involve movement. Their livelihoods depend in large part on these specific yet connected Caribbean presences in Toronto and New York, activated through the familial obligations that deliver women from across the city to the pick-up points each weekend. But if these are the conditions of possibility, I would also suggest that we see these women—tour operators and passengers alike—as active cultural producers, enablers of transnational links in diaspora who are deeply enmeshed in fabricating Caribbeanness via these visits to Caribbean people in other places, to Caribbean places other than in the region and to places that Caribbean people visit. The bus itself is a good example of how the Caribbean emerges as an effect of movement, for it is clearly much more than just a cheaper mode of transit. It is a familiar and noninsular space, one that brings women together, creating a context in which they share stories and offer support for the long journey back and forth. There is growing scholarly interest in how migrants act on their desires for “home,” whether expressed in family-oriented dreams of return or long-distance nationalism that takes more public collective forms.³⁶ Across these diasporic nodes, however, we can detect a broadening out from individual (insular) island identifications, a possible regional grammar and gendered frame of reference from the ground up. This is expressed in Julie’s description of what attracts her to the trips: “It’s a way of meeting your own.” It is not just that she participates in a transnational circuit on a continuous basis but that she also consciously locates herself in a wider field of social relations in which “your own” references a nascent Caribbean sensibility.³⁷ This potential, moreover, is grounded in strategies of social reproduction, so often unremarked and invisible despite what

35 Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured*, 84.

36 See Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

37 This distinction between transnational ways of being and ways of belonging is elaborated in Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1002–39.

their endurance in sustaining meaningful connection might disclose, beginning with the focus on women such attention necessarily requires.³⁸ For it is they who have shown such ingenuity in rerouting Caribbean itineraries (indeed we should not think of the region apart from these diasporic relationships). The fact that so many of these women do not regularly travel to the Caribbean (or may never have “gone back”) might lead one to conclude that they do not return:

Such a conclusion depends on seeing the Caribbean narrowly as fixed co-ordinates on a map that correspond to territory and ocean. Again, borders loom, threatening to cut us off from each other, denying the lesson these women's journeys promise. . . . These regularized trips are in fact a form of return, of weekly homage, to an idea of the Caribbean to which our travellers remain faithful. . . . It is these women . . . [who extend] a rich historical legacy into new terrain, and who continue to offer us a more expansive, connected and less jealously guarded map of this region that is our shared inheritance.”³⁹

The North American bus trips, then, provide a good example of Stuart Hall's formulation that “the diaspora is a place where traditions operate but are not closed, where the [Caribbean] experience is historically and culturally distinctive but is not the same as it was before.”⁴⁰ Open to the possibility and surprise of all sorts of flows, what emerges here is not just travels between discrete cityscapes by Caribbean women but a set of embodied movements that are key to understanding the ways in which the Caribbean materializes out of gendered relations and practices that take perhaps (at first glance) unanticipated but (once considered) entirely logical trajectories. In this remapping, Toronto emerges as an important point of departure with enduring and contemporary connections to the Caribbean that are as much outside as inside the region.

Finally, a focus on border-crossing should not lead us to romanticize mobility at the expense of considering those factors and challenges with which these travelers must contend and the relations of power they intimate, whether these are the conditions in the region that deliver a constant stream of Caribbean migrants to Toronto and New York, hustling in all kinds of ways to make ends meet; the continued promise of America that means the weekly commute only ever leaves from Toronto; the travel restrictions between the United States and Canada meant to keep people in (their) place and that differentiate between categories of diasporic Caribbeans (legal residents and hyphenated Canadian citizens, making the US visa or a Canadian passport the most valuable commodities of all);⁴¹ or the geographies of the tours that map out and onto African-Caribbeanness. It is also important to remember that these are

38 These more informal, indeed invisible, gendered practices are frequently elided from the masculinist orientation of hegemonic diasporic utterances and circuits. See the book discussion of Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), and particularly Michelle Stephens. “Disarticulating Black Internationalisms: West Indian Radicals and the Practice of Diaspora,” and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. “Erasure and the Practice of Diaspora Feminism,” *Small Axe*, no. 17 (March 2005): 100–149.

39 D. Alissa Trotz, “Gender, Generation, and Memory: Remembering a Future Caribbean” (Dame Nita Barrow Annual Memorial Lecture, Working Paper no. 4, University of the West Indies, Centre for Gender and Development, Cave Hill, Barbados, 2008), 29.

40 Stuart Hall, “Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities,” in Wahneema Lubiano, ed., *The House That Race Built* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 299.

41 Thanks to one of the reviewers for underlining this point.

not privileged travelers. They are mainly women who at the end of a long day's work board a bus with one small toilet for a twelve-hour journey, who are set down in another familiar city for a day and a half before making the trip back home. Because the detailed work, the minutiae of sustaining families falls to them, these women use a long holiday to shop across borders, enduring the possibly lengthy hassles of the customs officials, all in order to make their homes in Toronto and to sustain families across national space. They are located, embodied individuals, and as much as movement is a definitive aspect of who they are, it is the specific routes that they traverse and the borders that they cross that must inform our inquiry. Only in this way can we fully account for the gendered practices and unexpected routes through which Caribbean peoples attempt to make a living, make a life, and make themselves a(t) home in diaspora, by acting transnationally in ways that draw on and renew traditions, rehearsing historic circuits while also charting new directions and complex geographies of Caribbean affiliation.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to David Scott, Deborah Thomas, Ato Quayson, Kiran Mirchandani, and the reviewers for critical encouragement and comments.

Copyright of Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.