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THE CONSTRUCTION OF CARIBBEAN MASCULINITY: TOWARDS A RESEARCH  
AGENDA - A SYMPOSIUM



"Caribbean Masculinity at the *fin de siècle*"  
by

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## Caribbean Masculinity at the fin de siècle

It is by no means fortuitous that as we approach the end of the millennium, there is an emerging consciousness revolving around the question of gendered identities and gender politics in the Caribbean. In this regard, and for a variety of reasons which can not be addressed here, women have been much more reflective, and have become much more politicized by considerations of the socio-political construction of femininity and issues of inequality associated with the experience of womanhood. Conversely, men have paid less attention, theoretically, ideologically and intellectually, to the issue of our own gendered identities. We have assumed that the male privilege we enjoy and the hegemony which some of us exercise, render considerations of the construction of manhood and masculinity, peripheral to our own existential reality. We have been finding out rather belatedly however, that the issue of gendered identity is far from settled, and is subject to social, political and intellectual contestation. Such contestation of power, hegemony and privilege comes not only from women but, I argue, should emerge from within the ranks of men as well.

Why, one might ask, should these issues which are not settled but unsettling, gain more salience at the fin de siècle? The reasons are indeed quite complex. I would like to suggest however, that there is some precedence for such coalescing at this historical juncture. We have all become aware of the fact that the end of the millennium has historically been characterized by periods of ponderous thought.

The fin de siècle has a tendency to conjure images of decadence and decrepitude of the cultural, moral and political space, which appears to be desperately in need of transformation if apocalypse is to be averted. It is therefore not surprising that at the close of this century we are learning of the crisis which Caribbean men are presumed to be experiencing. I will return to this point subsequently. As Elaine Showalter argues the end of centuries seems not merely to suggest but to intensify crises.

The crises of the fin de siècle, then, are more intensely experienced, more emotionally fraught, more weighted, with symbolic and historical meaning, because we invest them with the metaphors of death and rebirth that we project onto the final decades and years of a century (1990, p. 2).

The above point is worth noting in so far as there is a need to recognize that there is more at stake here than the mere ending of the century, irrespective of its ominous connotations. Rather, the point is that the global, regional and national problems and concerns around such issues as economic restructuring of production, disparities of wealth and income between the developed industrialized countries and the so-called Third World, unemployment, debt, racial and ethnic conflict, environmental degradation and gender inequity, inter alia, have remained unresolved but have seemingly begun to crystallize as we move toward the end of the century. The end of the century tends therefore to magnify ongoing crises within the context of a particular regime of signification associated with the politics of 'endism' and of renewal and rebirth.

The politics of 'endism' has been building even before Daniel Bell precipitously declared the end of ideology. In more recent times however, Francis Fukuyama has reintroduced the discourse on endism with his declaration of the end of history. Indeed, the end of one epoch and the beginning of another is commonly indicated or at least implied in the plethora of scholarly articles and books containing the prefixes 'Post' and 'Beyond'. The concern here is that as we move toward the end of the century, the politics of 'endism' is accompanied by fears, real and imagined, of social and gender crises. I would like to focus a bit more on the experience of crisis.

It is indeed worthy of note that at the end of the last millennium, the social and gender crises which engulfed a country such as England, were occasioned by a fundamental restructuring of the economy, a shift from agricultural production to manufacturing, which was due in large measure to advancements in technology, which in turn led to displacement of human labor by machines, and marginalization of male labor which dominated the social relations of production at the time. Such fundamental restructuring of the social relations of production and the concomitant social dislocation occasioned by these changes resulted in an early exploding of the myth of the male breadwinner. Regenia Gagnier, who is cited by Showalter, comments that there was "a crisis in the 1890s of the male on all levels - economic, political, social, psychological, as producer, as power, as role, as lover" (1990, p. 9). What is remarkable is that globally, similar variables currently affect or are believed to affect some men in precisely the same way.

One must note of course, that the economic restructuring which characterized the end of the last millennium, is qualitatively different from that which marks the end of the present century. In the first instance, the technological developments of the 20th century in the areas of production, medicine, information, telecommunication, robotics, business and finance, are much more comprehensive and sophisticated, and have done more to transform our entire human existence.

The fact that towards the end of the 20th century, some of the problems of the 19th century still persist, is testimony to the failure to address these issues within the present system. However, it is precisely this systemic nature of the problem which is overlooked in many academic discourses of gender. Rather than contextualize the nature of the problem faced by men and women in terms of structural determinants, many reduce the problematic to the level of the individual or the collectivity, so that the issue becomes conceptualized as pathology to be corrected without reference to wider social considerations. It is within this context that ideas of Caribbean male crisis have to be reconceptualized.

I have been arguing for some time now, that men do not experience crises in a social vacuum (see Lewis 1990, pp.104-112). If Caribbean men are in crisis, then women, children and families, along with other institutions within civil society, must of necessity also be in crisis. This latter point is not based on any presumption of men's pre-eminence in society around which everything else revolves, but rather

on the nature of social interaction among individuals in any given social environment. It means therefore that to understand the problems which men and women face as this century comes to an end, we must begin to come to grips with the restructuring of the social relations of production at the global, regional and national levels, the external and internal pressures brought to bear on the Nation-state, which after all plays an instrumental role in fashioning the terrain of gendered identities, the nature of the crisis of civil society, partly the result of the impact of the first two factors, and the historical forces at work which coalesce around these issues. As we investigate the complexity of gender relations in the Caribbean, we cannot afford to ignore its corporeality. Failure to ground one's investigation in these considerations, truncates the analysis of gender relations, rendering it ludic if not entirely banal.

One further point about the nature of the crisis which is presumed to be visited upon Caribbean men should not go unmentioned here. Taking about the focus of black men as embattled and endangered in the United States, feminist social critic, bell hooks, argued against claims of the uniqueness of the pressure placed upon men as opposed to women. Her point would be equally valid in the context of the Caribbean. hooks while not negating the social and economic difficulties faced by black men, pointed to the fact that black women were also daily threatened in perhaps different ways, by sexism, misogyny and violence. She elaborated:

The assumption that black men suffer more or are more endangered is rooted in sexist thinking: the idea that the pain of men is always more important than that of women. From a sexist standpoint, black male concerns will always, always be seen as more in need of attention than those of black females (Race and Reason, 1994, p. 40).

As the Caribbean moves forward into the 21st century, those of us who study and try to understand masculinity should be mindful of avoiding the pitfall of the exceptionalism of men's suffering in a changing national and regional context. To the extent that male marginalization exists, not only is it mediated by factors of race, class, age and sexual orientation, it is also the product of changing socio-economic and political considerations and not of willful intent to penalize some men. In short, capitalist restructuring - which is the source of their <sup>much of</sup> alienation - is concerned with its own reproduction, and not particularly respectful of any gender which gets in the way of its drive for accumulation.

### Shifting Gender Relations

It is becoming increasingly clear that part of the social impact of the process of economic restructuring mentioned above, is the dislocation of gender roles. Given the scope and intensity of change taking place at all levels, it is entirely foolhardy to expect that gender relations would somehow be immune from transformation of some kind. It is precisely in the interstices of this process that considerable gender trouble engulfs the contemporary Caribbean. At the core of these

troubles is the exploding of the myth of the male breadwinner, the persistence of unemployment and the increasing feminization of manufacturing in the region.

The concept of a male breadwinner is for many men, at the core of the construction of masculinity. It is clearly not the only criterion of masculinity but inhabits an important space in the masculine imaginary. Defining men as principal wage-earners asserts and maintains male control over female labor power and reproduction. To the extent that the above is possible, it would suggest that the role of the male breadwinner is ideologically contingent on capitalism and patriarchal practices.

In her recently published work **The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean**, Helen Safa (1995) argues that the concept of the male breadwinner is becoming a myth as women worldwide become increasingly important contributors to the household economy. Safa clearly demonstrates how in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and for somewhat different reasons, in Cuba, economic necessity associated with lowering the unit cost of production, has led to the feminization of manufacturing.

As more women become employed at lower wages than those traditionally offered men, and as the latter become economically marginalized, the myth of the male breadwinner begins to explode, opening up opportunities in the process for feminist contestation of