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Making a Way: An Auto/ethnographic Exploration of Narratives of Citizenship, Identity, (Un)Belonging and Home for Black Trinidadian[-]American Women

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Making a Way: An Auto/ethnographic Exploration of Narratives of Citizenship,
Identity, (Un)Belonging and Home for Black Trinidadian[-]American Women

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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communication, relational communication

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my father Angelo Tony Woodruffe and my dear friend, Dave. You didn't live to see this moment, but you always saw me, living this moment.

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First, I would like to thank my dissertation advisor Dr. Keith Berry for the endless hours of conversation, debate and discussion that have resulted in this dissertation project. My heartfelt gratitude extends to Dr. Aisha Durham for your spirited encouragement and willingness to engage the conversations that helped me to declutter my mind and push myself a little further while reminding me to practice self-care. Thank you, Dr. Patrice Buzzanell for always finding the time to encourage and support my academic journey in meaningful ways. Dr. Manoucheka Celeste—I appreciate you and the guidance you offered to help me craft this dissertation. To Sasha Sanders and Marquese Ferguson—thank you for your friendship and genuine allyship throughout this intense life project. To my cousin Joanne Briggs, Liza Spinazola, Jessica Montalvo, and every person who has offered me time and space to listen and cheer me on, thank you. Lisa Merrill, your genie in a purple bottle granted your wish! Thank you for your friendship and support, always. I would also like to acknowledge Carolyn Ellis for her kindness and generous critique of my scholarship. Finally, none of this would have been possible without the unrelenting support of my husband Gordon with whom I have experienced moments of “better or worse” related to this academic journey. I am grateful that you have the patience of Job to love me through all of the madness. To my son, Preston, thank you for your love-laced impatience and pride in wanting your momma to become a “teacher-doctor.” You have kept me on track and pushing through this seemingly impossible journey at a time in my life when I absolutely did not want to take it on. You are my heart and my life’s inspiration. Thank you all.

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research study is to gather, convey and explore the lived experience related to transnational identity construction for Black Trinidadian[-]American women. I adopt an interdisciplinary approach to better understand what it means to live as, and be, a Black Trinidadian[-]American. Using auto/ethnography and interviews, I seek to answer the following research questions: (1) How do Black Trinidadian[-]American women describe their negotiation of cultural identity in Trinidad and the United States? (2) How do Black Trinidadian[-]American women describe “in-between” homeplaces within the intersectional context of gender, race, class, and culture? (3) How do Black, Trinidadian[-]American women describe transnational, affective, social, and embodied citizenships? The dissertation is comprised of personal narratives conveyed by interviewees, my own stories, and the analysis I conduct on our stories. More specifically, I explore the meaningfulness of issues concerning transnational identity, citizenship, and home. Overall, I aim for the study to demonstrate how Black im/migrant women from Trinidad negotiate and communicate their identities as dual-citizens to make sense of their lives, and the ways in which personal narrative, storytelling, and autoethnography, generally, provides researchers with invaluable ways of understanding under-represented groups, by highlighting valuable cultural and relational experiences.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I am at my Florida home in August of 2020 watching Kes The Band's live concert: "We Home Under One Roof."¹ It is Independence Day in Trinidad and Tobago. I came for the virtual joviality. I came for the sensation of home. This is the closest I am going to get to Trinidad for a while. It's been six years since I've been home. Home. I feel an unfamiliar sadness stirring in me which pushes its way into my thoughts, begging reason. I'm not ready to confront this reality. I don't know if it's because I'm living in a different state—a very "red" one—that I feel mostly restless, unsettled. I don't belong here. Doesn't everyone long to belong—either somewhere or to someone?

I don't know if I feel strange most of my days and nights because of where I am located. I find myself missing...missing home, missing that feeling of being wrapped in the comfort and companionship of friends and family. I miss them dearly, and the very idea of being reconnected makes me smile. The kind of smile that feels like seduction. I feel it all so intensely, reeling in the irreconcilable inevitability of disappointment—the absence of such basic, familiar connection. For no particular reason, I am now reminded of the folks who tell me I have "done well" for myself, that is, "for someone from the Islands." The words they use, and their ways of relating to

¹ Kes The Band, "We Home Under One Roof (Live Concert)" *YouTube*. Online video, <https://youtu.be/vRtvV-CgLQg>

my difference are sometimes presumptive, primitive, perturbing. What do they know about Island life?

“I don’t know how much I miss you.” One of my friends said this to me when I left New York City to move to Florida. I remember this now because, when I think about home, so much has now become unfamiliar that I, too, don’t know how much I miss home or worse, where home is. When I left Trinidad in 1994, I was energized, hopeful, and so very naïve. Today, my thoughts are shifting to my land of origin, that place I sung about as a teenager with my friends, my brother, and his friends. So much distance between all of us now. Migration does disruptive things to a person’s life in order to have a life. I don’t know that I will ever truly think of America as my home, although I am trying to find a way to harmonize my existence. I want to be at ease with where I am but finding balance is proving an arduous task. I am extending my arms as I “reach across different spaces, towards other bodies” (Ahmed, 2013, p. 94) who are trying to locate a place because they feel out of place, like they, too, don’t quite fit or belong here. I’ve not told this story before. My missing pieces of home are well-guarded, hidden by survival stories that impress upon me an urgency to tell my story of migration, to demonstrate my emerging and ongoing relationship with America before I forget what I endured or rather, what is, in fact, now missing. Mine, theirs, ours... six women tell their stories. Six lights turn on. How does one feel such ordinary life presence? How can I show you the life I yearn for in-between this life I am living now? Shhh...Kes is singing...“Stay close to me...stay close to me...”

Trinidad and Tobago is the place where I was born and that will forever hold an unfillable space in my heart. This year marks 28 years since I decided to leave Trinidad to pursue my education in the United States. Approximately thirteen of these years have been spent in-

between multiple changing legal statuses in the process of becoming an American citizen—e.g., international student, foreign worker, permanent resident. During each of these changes, my transnational experience is enacted in my daily social interactions as I travel in-between spaces to navigate the multiple and diverse ways in which identity (e.g., race, gender, class, nationality), citizenship and belonging interact to shape, and sometimes govern, lived experience. My orientation to, and deployment of, the term *transnational* refers to my dual citizenships and multiple identities that are in tension. I am of Trinidadian heritage (I was born and raised there) and American by naturalization. My use of transnational addresses mobility across and beyond territorial, social (i.e., socially imposed) and aesthetic borders (Doll & Gelberg, 2016). In speaking about my transnational identity, I am speaking about a set of racialized, gendered and classed understandings and socializations (Nagar & Swarr, 2010) that speak to, and about, my lived experience as an im/migrant² living the U.S.

Approximately 44 million people in the U.S. identify as being foreign born (US Census Bureau, 2020). Of this number, approximately six percent (400,000) of them are from Trinidad and Tobago³ (*Caribbean News, Latin America News*, 2016). Many of these Trinidadian immigrants settle in places such as New York City, Pennsylvania, Florida, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Baltimore (*Caribbean News, Latin America News*, 2016). Interestingly, the social and affective impact of their settlement is largely unexamined in the research literature. The work of this dissertation seeks to demystify the lives of some of these Caribbean im/migrants who identify as Black women who were born and raised in Trinidad, who migrated

² The use of “/” in the word im/migrant, accounts for those in the study who intentionally immigrated to the U.S. and those who through migration processes became legal citizens of the country. In all cases, we are immigrants to the U.S. regardless of how we arrived.

³ Trinidad and Tobago is one country, but two separate islands, governed by one Republic. Both islands are former British colonies. My references to Trinidad in this dissertation reflect those who were born and raised on the island Trinidad and not our sister isle, Tobago.

to the U.S. and became American citizens. “Black” in this dissertation refers to those who are of African descent or identification (see also, Davies, 1995; Hall, 1993). So that, when I speak about Black, Trinidadian[-]American⁴ women, I am centering my discussion about the lives of a group of women who self-identify as Black women, native-born Trinidadians, and naturalized Americans. I am included in this group of women. My hope is to get to better know the day-to-day experiences of these women to better understand their/our lives as citizens of both Trinidad and the U.S.

Situating (Myself) in this Research

I tell my story to examine the lived experience and relational ways of being a Black, Trinidadian, American, woman. By telling it, I aim to motivate others to share their experiences and material realities of negotiating and performing gender and nationalized difference in a raced body. As I mentioned in my opening narrative, I have not told my story before, and I certainly have not told it in this way. Nevertheless, I confront the vulnerability that comes with writing aspects of my life that I have kept unspoken, if not hidden for decades. Some of these memories were so deeply buried that I needed to resurrect old journals I kept since I was a teenager to help me re-collect experiences and guide my chronology of events, feelings, and outcomes. While memory certainly plays a significant part in how I account for some of my past events, my journals functioned as a personal archive.

I began this work curious to see if there were other women, like me, who have experienced some of the emotional complexities of duality (i.e., having two citizenships). Driven by my personal experiences of otherness and unbelonging, I recognize in my lived experience

⁴ The [-] recognizes and respects those women who do not identify as Trinidadian-American but see themselves as Trinidadian and American.

the emotional weight I carried for well over a decade that involved varying aspects of “missing”— home, friends, family, the feeling of safety and familiarity. This study is aided by the generous participation of five women: Nattie Girl, Winer Gyal #1, Bernadette, Symone, and Ertha Violet. At times my conversations with them were intense, frustrating, and deeply troubling as our interactions confronted what it meant to be a Black woman in America. And yet, there is also much pride in the knowledge that we came together relationally, to share, learn and center Black women’s experiences. Some of us left Trinidad wanting to experience something different outside of the island paradise we love dearly. Others were too young to make the decision to leave, but over time they decided to stay. And in our emigration, we realize that we all left a place we love to embrace the uncertainty of a place unknown. We had no way of knowing then how much our land of origin, that sweet island of T&T, the place where we are rooted would impact how we came to understand ourselves as American citizens.

By centering Black women as a distinct social group to describe our lived experience as epistemology, I contribute to Black feminist thought (see Barriteau, 2009; Collins, 2000). Not only are we making our way through the muddle of life’s messiness, but we are still trying to (re)imagine the possibility of what our futures *can* be. At the time of writing this chapter, I mourn the loss of the luminary Black, feminist scholar-activist bell hooks (1994) on whose shoulders (and stories) I stand, trying to face and name my own realities while simultaneously trying to “move beyond boundaries, to transgress” (p. 207) by locating and creating sites of belonging both inside the academy and out.

Relevant Literature

Intercultural Communication

Conceptually, my contribution entails updating the intercultural scholarship that is derived through the use of lived experience, storytelling, and Black women's representation in diaspora. Trinidadian historians like Bridget Brereton (1998) have invested in the work of Black Caribbean women, but the need to gather, understand and tell more stories about the lives of Black, Trinidadian women in diaspora remains essential work. Storytelling is typically rooted in Black feminist oral traditions (see Banks-Wallace, 1994). For this reason, my use of auto/ethnography in this study helps to support the way we use stories to help make sense of the world (Boylorn, 2013; Durham, 2014; McClaurin, 2001).

Methodologically, by performing a transnational Black feminist auto/ethnography, I examine the cultural lives of im/migrant others by attending to the role that power, privilege, and intersectionality play within their lived experience (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016). According to Rona Halualani et al. (2009), "framings of intercultural communication [have] argued for a conceptualization of culture from a critical perspective" (p. 18) to further examine the interplay of power and context. Bernadette Marie Calafell (2020) locates the 'critical' in intercultural communication in "embodied and affective" ways (p. 410), an approach through which flesh-to-flesh theorizing (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) not only contributes to knowledge production but also accounts for positionality and cultural practices. Through the sharing of stories, readers are often left with what Sarah Ahmed (2017) calls "impressions" that are not "clear or distinct" (p. 22) that demand we get "closer to the feeling" (p. 27). Such feelings and impressions are

affective experiences that I explore to open up a space to rethink knowing in the context of citizenship.

In addition, I use auto/ethnography to explore the complexities of Black, Trinidadian[-]American women by examining the embodied affect of their lived experience in relation to my own experiences as a Black, Trinidadian-American woman. The use of ‘/’ in auto/ethnography aims to recognize two things: first, the researcher and self (as a character) cannot be separated in autoethnographic writing and, second, this study includes both my personal stories and ethnographic interviews. As a mode of doing critical autoethnography, Black feminist auto/ethnography reaffirms a commitment to “a standpoint rooted in interrogation, resistance and praxis” (Griffin, 2012, p. 143). In this way, I join with Black feminists and women of color theorists by contributing first-hand accounts of im/migrant women’s lived experience to the robust literature related to identity scholarship in the field of communication (see for example, Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Celeste, 2017; Davies, 2013; Diversi & Moreira, 2018; Durham, 2014; Pal & Buzzanell, 2008).

By telling our stories, this study offers ethical and political sensemaking in intercultural communication regarding how knowledge claims are constructed (see Halaulani et al., 2009) about Black Trinidadian women’s experiences in the United States. Aisha Durham (2014) writes that using autoethnographic writing “centers the situated body as the interpreter of knowledge, privileges the emotive, and employs poetics that move from the ‘I’ outward” (p. 14). This movement outward shines a light on the stories and storytellers who dwell at society’s margins by capitalizing on “embodied knowing” (Durham, 2014, p. 105) derived from those overlooked if not altogether ignored stories, as previously stated (hooks, 1981; Madison, 1993). Furthermore, auto/ethnography is both a process and product (Ellis et al., 2011) which creates

the conditions for creative, experiential, and evocative examinations, and advocacy-related research that seeks social change.

The knowledges produced in this dissertation are co-constructed in that they reflect several voices in collaboration with mine. As such, my work may present alternative worldviews to commonly held beliefs or misconceptions. The unspoken embodied weight of yearning conjoins with unbelonging to impact everyday citizenship performances as a kind of living contradiction for Black Trinidadian[-]American women. Even as American citizens, the stories that come to light in this dissertation show how reflexivity and subjectivity partner in the (re)telling of lived experience. Although the articulation of struggle and learning is present in all the narratives (theirs and mine), as I discuss further below, much of my engagement reflects my own careful listening and other deliberate care practices. Part of this practice of care is related to the representation of the women with whom I create this work, because, in addition to my working attentively to depict their lives, I also have to respond to the way I (re)present them (hooks, 2015; Nettles, 2008). As H. L. Goodall, Jr. (2000) contends, all stories are “partial, partisan, and problematic” (p. 55). The work of this dissertation, therefore, continues the process of carefully gathering, telling, re-telling, writing, re-writing, analyzing and theorizing stories to represent complex identities which have been successful and constructive among Black feminist scholars (see Baker-Bell, 2017; Celeste, 2017; Collins, 2000; Davies, 1994; Durham, 2020; Griffin, 2012; Zinn & Dill, 1994).

As a both a critical and social justice theory, Black feminist thought supports the practice of women becoming “community builders” and “knowledge creators” (Rodriguez et al., 2015, p. vii), which are crucial aspects to Black women’s survival. In this light, as social conditions continue to change, Black women must innovate new forms of resistance as “oppositional

knowledges” (p.13). I engage with this work as a form of knowledge exchange to use our stories to emphasize issues of borders, boundaries, and histories in diaspora.

A Transnational Black Feminist framework (TBF) will rely on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Durham, 2020) to affirm and articulate the complexity of immigrant identities in relation to border/boundary travel. This culture-centered application also addresses the complex issues related to citizenship, belonging and home by connecting Black women im/migrants’ diverse realities while living in the U.S.

Relational Communication

The study of relational communication explores the social interactions and relationships that comprise people’s everyday lives (Berry, 2021; Wilmot, 1995). A relational orientation examines how meaning is co-constituted through these interactions and bonds and, in turn, presumes that all relating, much like all lived experience, takes place within situated cultural contexts. Engaging with the issues of the dissertation relationally enables me to focus on the symbolic messages that center on transnational migrations, and the bonds women create to explore how they/we understand and use these messages to shape their/our lives.

A relational orientation takes a constitutive approach to communication and culture and assumes that conversation partners “jointly” (re)make and use meanings (Shotter, 2008), and that communication and meaning-making tend to be processual phenomena that are ongoing, dynamic, complex and subject to change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Berry, 2021; Manning, 2014). By emphasizing relationality in my study, I am able to assess how women individually and collectively understand their/our identities as being raced and gendered as well as the nationalized difference that exists in communion with others in the U.S. I privilege personal

stories to create a space for the expression of transnational lives as memories that are (re)lived and (re)told among Trinidadian[-]American women as a form of meaning-making for this underrepresented group of women. I want this work to ignite a (re)imagining of epistemologies and ontologies regarding im/migrant stories in the U.S.

A relational approach allows us to foreground and take seriously the many formative interactions and bonds that are implicit in this complex process to show how a relational approach to culture impacts interactions and bonds. This entails orienting to culture as a site of struggle, which is, in turn, informed and tends to be governed by historical, economic, and societal structures that impact human agency and our experiences in communication (Durham, 2010, 2018). This process demands a more mindful approach when relating to difference by exploring how culture is both enacted and embodied. A relational approach to the study of cultural lives contributes to the field of communication by emphasizing the fundamentally cultural nature of communication.

To study identity, citizenship, and belonging as I do in this project entails examining how people form and negotiate identities communicatively. They are phenomena we “negotiate” insofar as identity formation, much like culture, is a contested process. Identity negotiation entails “gains” and “losses” in terms of who people are, want to be, and simply cannot be. In communication studies identities can be understood as both relational and negotiated (Davies, 1994; Davis, 1983; Gergen, 2009; Jackson, 2002; Hecht et al, 1993). To more deeply understand the complexity of identity negotiation, my engagement with transnational feminisms (see Alexander, 2006; Briggs, 2016; Davies, 2014; Fernandes, 2013; Grewal, 2005; Hall, 1995; Kaplan & Grewal, 2002; Mohanty, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981; Shome, 2006) deepens the exploration of issues of related to identity negotiation and culture for Black

Trinidadian[-]American women.

Auto/ethnography creates the conditions to re-imagine presumptions about people's cultural lives and cultural identities by providing a welcoming space for life stories that are often unheard and unrecognized (see, for example, Berry, 2021; Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011; Madison, 1993). As such, it is a suitable method to examine issues of affect as it relates to transnational identity research because I write from a complex space of the emotional and the personal (Lorde, 2004). Lorde (2004) affirms the power of personal storytelling and the role of feelings in knowledge production. She contends that "our real insights about living come from that deep knowledge within us that arises from our feelings" (p. 91). She insists that "feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge" (p. 91) and that the work of reimagining brighter futures means that we must examine our feelings—both the contradictions and the pain—to discover new ways of understanding lived experience.

I accept this challenge primarily by connecting feelings (affect) to understandings of *social citizenship*. Manoucheka Celeste (2017) argues that a social citizenship goes beyond the boundary of a legal citizenship and speaks to issues of belonging, inclusion, and group membership, which helps im/migrants to fit into society and feel at home. Therefore, in my examination of social citizenship as belonging, I aim to dispel the notion of the body being divorced from feelings that "result from a complex mix of historical, cultural, societal and environmental exposures" (Fortier, 2016, p. 1041). By framing my discussion within understandings of affective citizenship, and as a form of social citizenship, I respond to Anne Marie Fortier's (2016) call to "draw out" the interplay of power and inequality through affect in an effort to "move closer to a transformative politics of affective citizenship" (p. 1043).

By problematizing the interconnections of identity and citizenship as a form of social belonging, I contextualize the dynamic quality of affect, to assess the broader impacts of citizenship, identity, belonging and home for those like me who are foreign born. I use women of color theories of the flesh (see Durham, 2014; Madison, 1993; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) as embodied, evocative, and politically informed to explore the lives and material realities of Black women immigrants from Trinidad who are naturalized citizens to make the case that the ideas, values, and cultural dimensions of transnational women's lives are worthy of study. In this way, relational approaches are always already about culture and this relational approach creates a way of examining how people relate interculturally.

Contributions to Communication

- I update intercultural and relational communication by documenting how Black American Trinidadian women negotiate dual identity and narrate their lived experience of transnational citizenship.
- This study extends Black feminist theorizing in the context of social citizenship by effectively empowering women who devise unique ways of battling through shared struggle to carve spaces of belonging.
- I develop affective citizenship as shared, embodied and often contradictory struggles in transnational Black feminist thought.
- Through Black feminist auto/ethnography, my telling of their stories highlights an intervention in history to reclaim power and mark their significance as a generation of Americans, who began their journey in Trinidad (see CRC, 1983; Hull & Smith, 1982)

- I call attention to the use of a TBF framework to open a space for storytelling, listening and learning about these women’s stories of migration.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide my dissertation:

- (1) How do Black Trinidadian[-]American women describe their negotiation of cultural identity in Trinidad and the United States?
- (2) How do Black Trinidadian[-]American women describe “in-between” homeplaces within the intersectional context of gender, race, class, and culture?
- (3) How do Black, Trinidadian[-]American women describe transnational, affective, social, and embodied citizenships?

The corpus of this study comes from ongoing research related to documenting im/migrant identities and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) in the U.S. I firmly believe that the interviews I have conducted, and the stories I convey in the dissertation, can contribute to building a trajectory of scholarly resources and the discourse of im/migration and identity scholarship in the U.S. The imperative to continue this work is, for me, validated by the recent addition of a Caribbean Communication Caucus to the National Communication Association (NCA) in 2021 that specifically aims to represent and support research about the Caribbean diaspora. This affirmation is timely, and important.

A Transnational Black Feminist Framework

Identity, citizenship, migration and transnational blackness are key concepts in Black feminist thought. I situate my research within a Transnational Black feminist framework to

prioritize the “material realities” of Black women (Falcón & Nash, 2015, p. 5). According to Kia Hall (2016), a transnational Black feminist approach synthesizes Black feminist thought and transnational feminisms, which, in turn, is guided by “intersectionality, scholar-activism, solidarity building and attention to borders and boundaries” (p. 91). In this context, the term ‘intersectionality’ addresses systems of power, privilege, and questions of agency in the fight for, and proposal of, social justice reforms (see Collins, 2009; Collins 2015; CRC 1983; Crenshaw, 1998). The TBF framework uses a decolonizing approach to scholarship that forges connections to others’ struggles by engaging with “living legacies that embody Black feminist traditions” (Hall, 2020, p. 3). By sharing my and others’ stories I connect Black women in diaspora through shared and lived experience.

The sharing of lived experience is central to understanding how a TBF framework helps in creating an inclusive space for articulating, discussing, and understanding intersectional and international perspectives related to women’s lives in different contexts and geopolitical locations (Davies, 2014). Such perspectives focus on both similarities and differences related to women’s lived experience while simultaneously interjecting the consideration of affect (Alexander, 2006; Alexander & Mohanty, 2010; Falcón & Nash, 2015).

More specifically, a TBF framework guides how I engage with Black women to address the relational-intercultural nature of communication and identity, border/boundaries, citizenship and belonging in this study. Raka Shome (2006) reiterates the significance of transnational feminism and communication studies by emphasizing how these two disciplines force us “to confront” the interconnections and disconnections of “histories, geographies, nations, cultures, and economies” (p. 255). By engaging with TBF, I utilize decolonizing approaches to understanding power structures and dominant narratives by studying the lives of an

underrepresented group of women from an originally colonialized milieu and the nuances of their post-colonial experiences living as dual citizens in the U.S. (see Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Diversi & Moreira, 2018; Grewal & Kaplan, 2005; Mohanty et al., 1991).

Transnational Identity and Citizenship

Black feminist thought serves to connect everyday experiences as specialized knowledge to provide a way of understanding levels of social privilege and (dis)advantage (Collins, 2000; McClaurin, 2001). By centering this school of thought, I locate the understanding of my raced, classed, and gendered body in transnationalism by linking lived experience and narrative as sites of “meaning-making and empowerment” (Williams, 2018, p. 11). The urgency of work such as this is emphasized by Samantha Pinto (2013) who insists that we must challenge “the way we come to recognize and interpret our specific historical and social realities” (p. 7). As I describe in my stories (Chapter Two), when I entered the U.S. as an international student, I was unfamiliar with the racial, social, and political climate that exists in the U.S. Over time, as I moved toward attaining a U.S. citizenship, I came to know and understand not only how I was marked as a foreigner, but how this foreignness was understood by both white and Black Americans in U.S. society. And even when I finally became a U.S. citizen, I felt challenged to see myself outside the lens of the outsider within (Collins, 1986).

By asking us to contemplate “who counts as truly American,” Celeste (2017) examines the restrictive nature of citizenship for Black, im/migrant females who exist in the “liminal space between citizen and bona fide outsider” (p. 2). In her comparative media study of the material realities for Haitians and Cubans living in the U.S., questions such as “who counts” imply a disparate treatment for those who are racially marked, as being second-class citizens in the U.S.

to include African Americans. More recently, the notion of a differential citizenship for Black people in the U.S was publicly voiced by Senate Republican Minority Leader, Mitch McConnell, who stated that “African Americans” vote at similar rates to “Americans” (Schreiner, 2022). This statement implies that to white America, African Americans are not Americans thereby marking whiteness as normative. Such statements by political leaders have significant influence over perceptions of Black people and Black im/migrants in the U.S. Celeste’s (2017) study demonstrates that the co-construction of stories about cultural others by people—to include the media—greatly impact how immigrants are accepted in U.S. society. Placing culpability on the media in othering Black Haitians, Celeste demonstrates how Haitian “blackness and foreignness” (p. 37) is subsumed into pernicious narratives of unfavourability regarding their potential to be assimilated into U.S. society. In fact, Celeste argues that perceptions of “assimilation” are viewed as the most productive way for immigrants to “join society” and “minimize difference” (p. 140) in U.S. culture.

But what happens when assimilation is too demanding of im/migrants who become naturalized citizens? At the end of her book, Celeste asks for more attention to be paid to “black transnational migration” (p. 149) to make room for more “complex and nuanced” (p. 150) representations of Black experiences. Similarly, my research will explore the ways in which Black Trinidadian[-]American women individually and collectively understand their identity as raced and gendered complicated by a nationalized difference in among others (non-Trinidadians). The main sites of discovery relate to complex navigation of social citizenship, as belonging and articulations of identity as foreign-born persons. Additionally, this study also examines the impact of these two elements on understandings of home.

Citizenship

Generally speaking, citizenship, as a conditional status, is most often discussed in terms of legality (birth or naturalization), classed identity, territorial institutions, cultural capital, multiculturalism, globalization, and immigration (see for example, Benhabib, 2004; Bordieu, 1984; Isin & Nyers, 2014; Kivisto, 2002; Lazar, 2013; Marshall, 1950). More recently, however, the discourse of citizenship has expanded to include new and revised concepts related to identity and belonging (Celeste, 2017). A social citizenship is a communicative construct that relies on interaction to form relational bonds and foster feelings of belonging within a community.

Citizenship is a multidimensional discourse that recognizes practices, categories and fragmentations of inclusion and exclusion, participation, and belonging (Aranda et al., 2014; Celeste, 2017; Holston & Appadurai, 1999). Some of these inclusionary and exclusionary practices actualize in the women's stories presented in this dissertation and are recognizable as differences in accents, class and cultural experiences. In the context of U.S. history, class becomes an engrained immigration policy narrative in terms of who can migrate to the U.S. and who qualifies to become a citizen. Class and education levels factor into immigration policies, placing immigration policy as "never neutral" but rather "ideological" (Celeste, 2017, p. 4). For these reasons, how class and education are factored into immigration policies makes some im/migrations more possible than others.

Broadly speaking, citizenship is about inclusion and access to community membership (Glenn, 2011). However, citizenship can also be understood as a commodity, or a thing to be acquired (political citizenship). Thus, the absence of a *legal citizenship* reinforces exclusion. In other words, although the impetus is to place high value and importance on the legal commodity, the act of *becoming[a]citizen* is contested because it can diminish the affective value (e.g.,

feelings) of the citizenship by imposing emotional weight on im/migrant bodies (Ahmed, 2010). Similarly, although we might imagine that these tensions would or could be easily resolved once a legal citizenship is acquired, on the contrary, the process of inclusion takes yet another turn which my participants identify as a kind of insider-outsider dynamic (Collins, 2000).

Citizenship in this dissertation, therefore, is understood as social belonging (Celeste, 2017; Glenn, 2011) with citizenship performances demanding identity negotiation in situated contexts (Allen et al., 2012; Bridgewater & Buzzanell, 2010; Davis, 1983; Durham, 2014; Hammers & Alexander, 2018; Jackson, 2002; Mc Ferguson, 2020; Toomey & Ting-Tomey, 2013). In the following section, I discuss the significant dimensions of affective citizenship and social citizenship in relation to this study.

Affective Citizenship

Affective citizenship is a “transformative and critical approach” which recognizes “the emotional relations through which identities are formed” (Mookherjee, 2006, p. 36). According to Anne Marie Fortier (2016), affective citizenship relates to “how citizenship takes place by emphasizing how it involves emotions, feelings, bodies” (p. 1040). This type of citizenship might offer a kind of positionality where the body acts as an “interface” that is affected by multiple social, political, situational, and emotional elements (Seigworth et al., 2010, p. 11). Therefore, to study citizenship in this way is to confirm the relevance of emotions and feelings in legal and social migration processes. I explore some of the broader concepts associated with this citizenship below.

The concept of affect has been explored in the research literature in numerous ways. For example, Diana Wolf (1997) uses the term *emotional transnationalism* to situate im/migrants

“between different generational and locational points of reference—their parents, sometimes also their grandparents and their own—both between the real and the imagined” (p. 459). Wolf connects the complex emotional and embodied mobility by relating the experiences of Black women in diaspora to their desires for connectivity and friendship. Emotional transnationalism, therefore, enables us to recognize how ideas and feelings are linked to race, ethnicity, nationality, nation-state ideologies and cultural homeplaces (hooks, 2019). Bianca Williams (2018) engages the intersections of power and privilege associated with emotional transnationalism and uses it as a framework to guide an understanding of transnational connections as being sustained through “emotions and ideologies” (p. 4) in the construction of Black women’s identities, networks, and communities. By placing the affective responses of Black women’s experiences to travel and friendship, Williams (2018) examines the intersections of class, race, and gender in mobility for leisure. Although I do not pursue the topic of leisure in this study, her position on affect can help to explain how longing intensifies as co-presence (e.g., as living-feeling-being) in the privileged status of the im/migrant imaginary, and offers a framework for connecting the intersections of race, class, and gender in citizenship discourse, as affect.

In theorizing the weight of transnationality on im/migrant bodies as *embodied transnationalism*, Ramasubramanian et al. (2021) describe the “intimate experiences of human-made political borders that define, limit, and restrict flows of the “Other” (p. 5). Looking ahead, the material realities of embodied transnationalism will differ among my participants in terms of how they came to, and continue to experience their lives as naturalized citizens of the U.S. The process of coming to naturalization is always and already confined by legal processes which require strict criteria that include biometrics as proof of clean criminal records, economic ability, and costly sponsorship by a family member, spouse, or organization. All of these experiences

intersect gender, race and class in situated contexts (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021) to make the case for connecting affective citizenship with social citizenship.

Social Citizenship

A social citizenship goes beyond the boundary narrative and speaks to ways of being and belonging (Celeste, 2017; Marable & Jones, 2008; Williams, 2018). Furthermore, the construct speaks to how these women with whom I am in conversation come to understand who they are as Black women who are Trinidadian and American citizens living in the U.S. The TBF framework I use is informed by Communication scholars who have explored the discourse of citizenship as forms of inclusivity/exclusivity and in-between spaces at, and beyond borderlands (see for example, Anzaldúa, 1987; Flores, 2019; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). For example, Lisa Flores (2019) observes a shift in conceptualizing borderlands related to issues of marginality affecting inclusion, exclusion, and other social divisions. Furthermore, Flores believes that research about border cultures should be celebrated because they offer insights for combatting oppressions in border spaces that may be real, imaginary, or aesthetic. Through intersectional approaches that privilege lived experience and flesh-to-flesh theorizing, I am joining with these scholars who seek to connect those paradoxical elements of lived experience by reconceptualizing border/boundary narratives to address issues of belonging.

In addition, the issue of citizenship and transnationality has been explored communicatively in the areas of Critical Cultural Studies (Atay, 2021; Mutua 2007; Shome, 2006). Ahmet Atay (2021) calls for the “creation of transnational classrooms” as a decolonizing process to create spaces of inclusion for those who are marked by difference (e.g., language, ethnicity, citizenship, nationality). Atay contends that we need to challenge power structures and,

in turn, emphasizes the need for transnational and postcolonial perspectives in pedagogical praxis to reject being “toned-down diversity advocate[s]” (p. 46). In *Media Studies*, Celeste, (2017) takes on the task of examining the role of media in contributing to feelings of unbelonging among Black Haitians in her comparative study of the migration experiences of Cubans and Haitians in the U.S. Other Media studies scholars investigate issues of Caribbean identity through content analyses on digital platforms such as Twitter (Lloyd & Massay, 2021). Melissa Bridgewater and Patrice Buzzanell (2010) use storytelling to analyze Caribbean immigrants’ positionality and meaning making processes in workplace communication experiences to include identity negotiation and adaptive techniques.

TBF provides a useful framework to discuss narratives of social citizenship as belonging among Black im/migrant women. The research presented in this study directly challenges stereotypical understandings about who im/migrants are, what their lives were like before migration, and what their lives are like in the U.S. post migration. The women with whom I am in conversation in this study are all college educated though this was not a requirement to participate in the study. Not only do I work to advance perceptions of “embodiment and intersectionality” to expand how we understand complex identity construction (Calafell, 2020, p. 413), I show how “the struggle for social legitimacy and belonging” (Celeste, 2017, p. 151) impacts Black Trinidadian women’s identity in situated cultural contexts.

By extending concepts of citizenship put forth by Celeste (2017), my dissertation situates social citizenship as belonging through a relational-intercultural communication lens framed by transnational Black feminisms. I center the lived experience of im/migrant women from the Anglophone Caribbean, and, more specifically, my native country of Trinidad and Tobago. Taking into account the increasingly diverse racial, ethnic and cultural bodies that comprise the

U.S., my study underscores the exigence of engaging in communication scholarship that centers underrepresented groups. The examination of the tensions related to citizenship, identity and home further aim to advocate social change in the academy and society writ large.

What I examine in this dissertation relates to the core contentions of a specific group of Trinidadian im/migrant women who leave their home country and try to adjust to the demands of living in a foreign land. To attain a social citizenship would imply that all naturalized Americans can now be included in American society because they have been granted a legal right to live and participate in it, though that is not necessarily so. Thus, this study seeks to demonstrate how lived experience impacts our social location through not only the act of inhabiting space, but also the ways in which we assign meaning to our spaces and interactions in them communicatively (Mohanty, 1993; Moya, 1997; Williams, 2018). Therefore, the interconnections of affective citizenship and social citizenship address how feelings become attached to citizenship and underscore how im/migrants are challenged to enact, experience, interpret and negotiate feelings as naturalized citizens of the U.S.

Transnational Caribbean Migration

Lear Matthews (2013) defines transnational migration as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 3). Many people who migrate from the English-speaking Caribbean are from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Grenada, Dominica, and the Bahamas, respectively (Zong & Batalova, 2019). Their reasons for migration tend to vary and can include the desire to earn a formal education, economic advancement, or, as this dissertation will demonstrate, those who want to experience life outside of Trinidad and Tobago. In all cases,

the challenge of maintaining transnational connections relies on being able to visit one's homeland and maintain community networks to ground "the culture of origin and by extension, emotional connectedness" (Matthews, 2013, p. 6). This speaks to one significant issue I will examine which investigates how the women whom I interview understand their gendered cultural bodies that live "in-between" homeplaces (see RQ2).

Caribbean migration has contributed to research in which scholars theorize mobile diasporas and transnationality (see for example, Basch, et al., 1994; Clifford, 1997; Gilroy, 1993; Matthews, 2013; Puri, 2003; Schmidt et al., 2007). Diasporas can refer to migrant or transnational populations—people who are living in a country outside of their country of origin who still maintain ties to their country of origin. While diasporas are not homogenous, diasporic identities can be based on countries of origin and ethnic affiliations, creating diasporic communities within the host country. The issue of belonging to two countries, however, often threatens both adaptation and assimilation. Conversely, Communication scholars Antonio Tomas De La Garza and Kent Ono (2015) propose a "differential adaptation" which they use to acknowledge "the radical diversity of immigrants' experiences, immigrants' agentic efforts to navigate pressures to assimilate...reshape subjectivities, culture and society" (p. 270). This concept offers a counternarrative by linking relationality and issues of power in the context of im/migration and citizenship to offer a perspective that places value on immigrants' lives and ways of being and doing.

The notion of a differential adaptation can be largely appealing for new im/migrants to the U.S. With the passing of the *U.S. Immigration Act of 1965*, many of the legal and racial barriers to immigration and citizenship were removed. However, their removal failed to eliminate the strong national identity of many im/migrants, so much so that to be from the

Caribbean was to enter America as (post)colonial diasporan subjects (Hall, 1996). More specifically, as Black Trinidadian women entering the United States, we were enfolded into the socio-political identity politics of American Blackness. For many of my participants who identify as Black, but not African American or Black American (see Chapters Three and Four), the use of a national differential (“I am Trinidadian”) becomes an ethnic signifier that helps them to self-identify in ways that support their naming and self-recognition.

Transnational Blackness

Many im/migrants who integrate (assimilate and/or acculturate) within a society navigate layers of legal and social restrictions that are complicated by race, class, and gender (Celeste, 2017). Celeste (2017) explores these issues of transnationalism as a politics of identity through what she conceptualizes as *transnational blackness* in her examination of racialized immigration and representations of Haitians and Cubans. She describes “the ways blackness is defined, framed, experienced and the way it does (or does not) travel across national boundaries” (p. 3). Her work shows how even those native-born Black Americans who have a legal citizenship experience a differential citizenship to non-black Americans. Additionally, she underscores how U.S. political ideologies shape attitudes and beliefs about Black people which, in turn, impact citizenship experiences. This kind of traveling blackness (e.g., across borders and boundaries) highlights how historical circumstances in addition to race, gender and class and racialized immigration policies inform border/boundary movements (Celeste, 2017).

Such ideas on how racism works to complicate and control power relations in U.S. society are a central principle of Black feminist thought (Barriteau, 2009; Collins, 2000). Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, Gloria T. Hull, Angela Davis, bell hooks and

Patricia Williams have all emphasized the critical work of defining and naming Black women's experiences. For instance, Audre Lorde (1984a) rejects the notion of a global "sisterhood" that falls under the umbrella of transnational feminisms. She writes, "white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to homogeneity of experiences covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist" (p. 116). The women I speak with articulate the ways in which they have felt criticized and ostracized by both white and Black Americans living in the U.S., showing how nationality also inserts itself as an ethnic signifier of difference as well as a contributor to oppressions against Black women. As such, these nuanced "boundaries of blackness" (Marable & Jones, 2008, p. 2) can be understood as exploring the range of Black experiences that are interconnected by racial and ethnic diversity within a democratic society.

When a Black woman like me enters a new diasporic site such as the U.S. from the Caribbean, I am "entering" all the sociohistorical and political tensions of not merely being an outsider as a Trinidadian, but as a Black woman being compared against other U.S. Black and African American women (Alexander, 2006). Related, Carole Boyce Davies (1994) emphasizes the implications of self-identification and labeling by insisting that terms such as "Black," "African American," "Caribbean," and "Afro-Caribbean" "...carry their strings of echoes and inscriptions" (p. 5). Therefore, for accurate representation, the diasporan subject (Hall, 1996) must become conscious about what we mean, understand and signal when the term "Black" is used in different locations (e.g., the Caribbean and the United States).⁵ Davies (1994) states:

Politically, the term "Black" is linked essentially and primarily with a vision of a (Pan-Africanist) Black World which exists both in Africa and in the diaspora. But "Blackness"

⁵ See also Reuel Rogers (2001).

is a color-coded, politically based term of marking and definition which only has meaning when questions of racial difference and, in particular, white supremacy are deployed. (p. 7)

The term “African-American” is most often used in reference to the racial umbrella of Black Americans who are of African descent as a kind of “monolithic construction out of a diverse continent of peoples, cultures, nations and experiences” (Davies, 1994, p. 9). This positioning resonates with my participants who do not identify as African American or Black American, but instead prefer to be addressed as either Trinidadian-American or Trinidadian and American.

Transnational Black feminist work recognizes that “our current geographical locations are products of multiple historical processes which have used us as subjects in various ‘nation-states’ of the world, having to interact with other similarly or differently produced individuals” (Davies, 2014, p. 89). To be transnational in diaspora is to live in imbricated diasporas while continually practicing identity negotiation. A TBF framework aids in navigating the space of social citizenship and identity negotiation, to address these issues more fully.

Home

Post-colonial theorists define the concept of “home” in terms of patterns, movement, and transformation (see Fanon, 1961; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1992; Hall, 1995). Home, like identity, is not a monolith. For example, Devika Chawla (2014) uses ethnography to deconstruct and complicate how ideas of home are maintained, re-lived and released so that home becomes “a change of life” (p. 26) and “a conversation of struggle” (p. 174). Jacqui Alexander (2006) theorizes that home is “a space and place in which time enters the movement of Sacred energies” (p. 328). Aisha Durham (2014) defines home as encompassing “physical, cultural, and

intellectual spaces” (p. 2), an extension of bell hooks’(2019) notion of homeplaces as supportive spaces and kinship networks. Rona Halaulani (2019) uses critical auto/ethnography to write about migration itself as a “type of home” (p. 94) in her own narratives of identity and belonging as a mainland Hawaiian. In each case, the subjectivity of home is defined by space, place and felt experiences within culture and community.

As a construction of transnational identity, home is a discursive space, a space of mobility, the traveling of felt experiences that contribute to (re)conceptualizing new spatial and temporal practices outside the country of origin and within their diasporic locale (Aranda et al., 2014; Chawla, 2014). Torn between acculturation and homogeneity, home is a site of transgression that demonstrates how “uprootings” (dislocations and relocations) are enacted for some transnationals (Chawla, 2014, p. 24). As we shall see, home for the Trinidadian transnational women in this study is a site of (re)creating and (re)imagining amidst a tension of (un)belonging to life here in America and a simultaneously yearning for life as we once knew it to be in Trinidad. Although Celeste (2017) suggests that the distance between home cultures is “symbolic and cultural” (p. 145), to be physically distanced from home is to embody ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; Ahmed, 2000). This loss is most often marked by the absence of particular cultural connections, customs, and strategies of embodied copresence to include music, food, and language (Aranda et al., 2014; Carling, 2008).

Writing a Black Feminist Auto/ethnography

To provide valuable insight into the lives of people, ethnographers study others by observing their lived experience as performed in everyday contexts (Conquergood, 1991; Rosaldo, 1989). By studying culture, we can think reflexively about the way(s) cultural values,

norms and beliefs are embodied everyday life performances and communicative acts (Berry, 2016; Boylorn, 2013; Durham, 2014; Ellis et.al., 2014; Pelias, 2018).

Methodologically, auto/ethnography is a powerful way to experience and learn from the subjectivities of lived experience that demand attention and affirmation. My auto/ethnography and the interviews contribute first-hand accounts of the lives of im/migrant women whose stories provide testimonies to the material realities of Black Trinidadian[-]American women. These women, including me, are ordinary people you may encounter in everyday life interactions at work, at the supermarket or at a community function. What you may not know when you see us (if you even notice us in the first place) is that we are existing between two realities, which, to us, are very different from each other. We live in the U.S. simultaneously yearning for the life we once had, in Trinidad.

The tasks of recruiting, gathering, writing, and interpreting their/our stories are germane to the auto/ethnographic process (Berry, 2021; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Boylorn, 2013). This work is certainly not easy. What does it take to convince people to have a conversation with you about the most intimate details of their migration experience? What does it mean to ask personal questions about the way cultural others live/have lived their lives? How do we convince someone that their story is important and needs to be heard? How to assure someone that you will care for the details of their personal life as though it was your own? These are some of the questions that inform the spirit with which I approach auto/ethnography in this dissertation.

I came to Black feminist auto/ethnography because I was trying to understand representations of my own identity and experiences of dual citizenship (see Woodruffe, 2021). I quickly found this approach to the researching and storying of lives to be relatable. Black feminist auto/ethnography allows me to “embrace self-definition as a means for Black women to

be labeled, acknowledged and remembered as they wish” (Griffin, 2012, p. 12). It is a mode of enacting critical auto/ethnography that prioritizes intersectionality as an analytical lens by attending to the role of power and privilege (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, 2020; Holman Jones, 2016). Furthermore, critical auto/ethnography commonly explores relational components of intercultural communication and cross-cultural experiences such as transnationality (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016). The personal accounts that comprise my and the women’s accounts demonstrate meaningful and epiphanic moments that are rich with thick descriptions of the day-to-day identity negotiations of self in relation to Other. But how do we “find the story in the experience?” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 93).

Finding the Story

After writing *Surviving from the Margins: A Conversation About Identity with James Baldwin* (Woodruffe, 2021), I began to wonder if there were other women who, like me, were facing similar struggles of being Trinidadian and locating a space of belonging as a naturalized American, in the U.S. I felt an urgency to address these issues based on the divisive political nature of the U.S. and the increasing anti-immigrant sentiment incited by the Donald J. Trump Administration. I knew my story intimately, so how I navigated my own self-disclosure was *my* choice. But how could I expect others who might, to me, be strangers, to share their deepest fears and feelings about their lives? How do I creatively and experimentally “show” these experiences and not just “tell” or tell of them (Ellis et al., 2011)? What can be learned by leaning into these deeply personal, emotional experiences? How can I create a responsible, emotional, and relational climate via digital technology such as Zoom? Naturally, I want to write a powerful and meaningful story, but I need and want to consider the ethical responsibilities of my researcher-

self who is membered by the group of women I am researching. What can we learn about each other, together and how can I best represent these knowledges? To show the lives of Black, Trinidadian[-]American women, I challenged myself to take readers on an intimate journey into the lives of these women and to my life, so we can experience our worlds as best is possible in terms of how we understand them. My aim is to capture the tensions of our cultural lives as a communicative act of meaning-making (Bruner, 1986).

Recruitment and Selection

Once I received approval from the Institutional Review Board at my institution (see Appendix A), I began to search for women who might be willing to share their stories. My initial plan was to recruit participants via the Trinidad and Tobago embassy in the U.S.; however, due to the impact of COVID-19 on places of business, this approach simply wasn't feasible. The alternate I chose was to use a snowball sample consisting of five women ranging in age from 40-55 years old. All women were born and raised in Trinidad. The length of being/becoming an American citizen differs among them. I chose to recruit through my network of friends on Facebook. I reached out to Nattie Girl in June 2021, who I knew from various culture circles. She happily agreed to participate. Also, on Facebook, I reached out to Winer Gyal#1 (in June 2021) and Symone (in August 2021)—both of whom I knew because we attended the same Catholic primary school in Trinidad. Winer Gyal#1 and Symone also shared their experiences of our interview process with Bernadette and Ertha Violet, and they both were eager to participate and support my project. I interviewed Bernadette in August 2021 and Ertha Violet in September, 2021. Admittedly, I was both surprised and delighted that these women were genuinely interested in my study. Trinidadians, in general, tend to be very private with the kind of specific

details I needed for participation in this project. Their willingness to participate was reassuring and empowering. The participants for this study are living in various parts of the United States—New York, Georgia, Maryland, and Texas.

Each of the women were required to fill out a Qualtrics survey that I used to qualify them for the study and to document their informed consent forms. The survey asked them to self-identify in terms of race, gender, age and to verify their U.S. citizenship status. Once I received their signed consent forms, I emailed each person to schedule a time to have the Zoom interview. Each interview was guided by a list of prepared questions (see Appendix B) and lasted approximately two to three hours. My analysis is constructed based on approximately 20 hours of interviews conducted via Zoom with my participants to gather first-hand accounts of lived experience. Although I use the word “interview” here, I place high emphasis on the conversation with these women.

I recorded and transcribed each conversation within 24 to 48-hours after it took place using Otter.ai transcription software. I then reviewed each transcript line by line to account for any dialects, colloquialisms and intonation used in our conversation. Following this phase, I reviewed the transcription with the video noting and annotating the transcript for reactions, expressions (non-verbal and verbal), and hesitations in our conversation. In each review, I revisited the interview questions, made notes related to the conversation interaction and, subsequently crafted a storied response from each participant. The interview protocol guided how I organized the conversations as stories, after I completed the transcription phase. I used NVivo software to assist with locating patterns related to ideas and sensitizing concepts (such as, citizenship, belonging, affect, identity, home). In this way, I was able to identify and annotate the

questions I am trying to answer while also assessing how each interview was influencing my own understanding of dis/similar experiences.

According to Adams et al. (2021), “all lived experience is situated within relationships and experience” (p. 3). My research questions guided the approach I took to assessing each conversation and, in so doing, I focus on “relational patterns of experience—encounters, reactions and interactions” (p. 3) among each of the five women. In our conversations I listened for any turning points, or key episodes in their lives. During my analysis, I studied the transcripts looking for any patterns, surprises, questions and potential future research considerations.

The transcripts were then edited based on the ways in which the various insights and stories shared related to my research questions. In these conversations I noted five main patterns related to elements of their lived experience: 1) Turning points that offer details about their reasons for migration; 2) Articulations of identity as specific descriptions related to self-naming, self-identification and/or labeling; 3) Understandings of social citizenship which covers the legal and affective issues related to becoming a citizen of the U.S to include feeling as though they do/not belong in this country; 4) Interaction and relationships, to include specific episodes in a story (epiphanic moments) that show how issues of citizenship, belonging, identity and home are communicated in relationships to include secret keeping, spirituality and emotionality; and 5) Alternate futures and survival tools is the final pattern of lived experience I explore that seeks to answers to what advice would they give to someone wants to leave Trinidad to come to the U.S. today, and what things they should pack in a survival tool kit.

I then worked with the transcripts to create the stories included in Chapter Three. Unfortunately, due to researcher time constraints and participant work commitments, follow-up

interviews were not possible. Any clarification or elaboration on a particular issue was conducted via email.

About the Women

This dissertation centers the stories of Nattie Girl, Winer Gyal #1, Bernadette, Symone and Ertha Violet. Each of these five women shared with me their stories of lived realities which were crucial to the success of this project. Nattie Girl is a 50-year-old Black woman who left Trinidad at the age of 14 years old with her mother and siblings. She arrived in the U.S. as a permanent resident (i.e., she held a Green Card). Winer Gyal #1 is Black woman in her mid-40s, married, mother of two, who left Trinidad in her early 20s with a boyfriend, intentions of getting married, and pursuing an advanced educational degree. Bernadette is a Black woman in her mid-50s and mother of two who came to the U.S. to pursue her education and eventually became a citizen through family sponsorship. Symone is a single Black woman in her mid-40s who came to the U.S. to pursue her education and, over time, became a U.S. citizen. Ertha Violet, is a Black woman in her mid-40s, married, mom of two who left Trinidad at age 12, who obtained sponsorship through her family. I join these women, as a Black woman in her mid-40s who came to the U.S. to pursue her education and who became an American citizen 16 years after entry into the U.S.

The Conversation Process/Liming

I use the word “conversation” instead of “interview” because of the personal and intimate details that transpired during our virtual interactions. I could not fathom treating my participants, my conversation partners, as traditional “research subjects” given the open-ended approach to

the questions. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), the interview can be understood as a purposeful conversation between people. Although the premise of our interaction was an interview, the actual interaction felt more like an engaging conversation. In our relating, I took seriously the imperative of mutual trust, clarity and transparency as we strove to co-construct meaning from the depth of our shared and unique lived experience.

I recognize the power differential that exists between me and the participants, as the privileged insider and the researcher who is being entrusted with their life stories. Building trust was crucial to succeeding in this process and, therefore, I needed to cultivate a relationship with these women. I began each conversation by thanking each participant for her time and asking some general questions (e.g., “Where are you zooming in from?”), prior to leading into the goals of my research and what I was hoping to accomplish through our conversation. I explained any terms that might have seemed unclear to ensure that they understood exactly what my questions meant. I was careful to give each participant time to make notes and ask any questions they might have about the process and the project. I reiterated to each participant that I would not share the recorded videos with anyone, and that the transcript would feature only their chosen pseudonym. I also relied on a ritual of *liming* the women and I were aware of, and informally practice, to help us relax and feel comfortable and open to share our stories.

In Trinidad, “liming” refers to informal storytelling practices with friends. It is a version of hanging out with friends and family, usually accompanied by music, the consumption of good food and alcoholic drinks and a lot of storytelling. In fact, much of a Trinidadian’s cultural identity is centered around, and celebrated through, liming (McClish, 2016). In these relational environments, Trinis laugh boisterously, and tease and joke, effortlessly. Our cultural expression of storytelling is often animated, hyperbolic, and jovial. Frequently, in the telling of one story,

another story effectively unfolds and opens the sharing pool for the telling of more and more stories. I depended on this insider cultural element not only to help us relax, but also for depth and the expansion of my conversations with my participants. Also, this form of cultural representation in research is a form of democratizing knowledge production. Most times by sharing my own stories, I created a supportive space for the women to become more disclosive with the occasional uncomfortable details of their experiences, which deepened our conversational connection. Again, this approach does not eliminate the power dynamics that shape the conversations, but rather highlights a cultural aspect of our lives that feels familiar. (I return to liming in Chapter Three when I engage with the literary to show these women's stories).⁶

These courageous women shed light on the material and embodied weight of (un)belonging through their storytelling. The use of storytelling is intended to disrupt and decolonize how knowledge is created in the academy by focusing on the personal and decentering whiteness. By telling their stories, we intimately connect with and learn more about the disjunctures embedded in cultural experiences by attending to the role of power and privilege in our/their lived experiences and everyday interactions (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Davies, 2013; Madison, 2010). In these ways, I join with Black feminists who have established that lived experience can serve as both “criterion of meaning” and “credibility,” supporting the imperative of storytelling as a productive form of theorizing ways of knowing, being, and doing (Collins, 2000, p. 274).

⁶ In Chapter Three, I create a fictional ‘lime’ as an occasion where the women could meet and talk, although they did not meet. All interviews were one and one, with me and the participant via Zoom.

Researcher Ethics

I am very aware of the privilege of being the authorial voice in this work and, rather instinctively, I know that I need to work to be conscious of the potential “blind spots” that might exist for me as a researcher who so closely identifies with these women. How will I engage with relational ethics as an ethics of “care” and “dignity” in my study (Ellis, 2007, p. 4)? Patricia Hill Collins (2000) reiterates that one dimension of Black feminist epistemology involves an “ethic of caring” (p. 281). Caring in this study becomes heart-work because when women speak about their/our lived experience we often do so with emotion, and empathy which centers the “knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2000, p. 282). Therefore, the care practices I exercise concern how I *speak about* these women and also how I choose to *speak for* this group of women.

In my field notes and transcript annotations, I marked moments when I am speaking “as” researcher and when I am speaking “with” the community, as the insider-outsider (Collins, 1986) using different colored highlighters. Although we share a commonality of being Black Trinidadian, American women, I needed to be cognizant of where our experiences converge or diverge. It was important to note such moments where being membered in this community may influence how I understand the participants’ lived experience. What, if any, aspects in writing about this Caribbean community might fall outside of my everyday awareness? Will my portrayals of the community perpetuate stereotypes about Trinidadian women instead of challenging them? How can I enact this research to inform, empower and enlighten? For those moments when I encounter potential internal conflicts regarding the personal accounts of my participants, and the accounts demonstrated in my own stories, I work in reflexive ways that

engage with the issues directly and with depth, and write about my reactions to these moments, to help ensure I am performing ethically.

Chapter Summaries

I invite you to travel the journey into the lives of six Black, Trinidadian[-]American women that comprises the remaining chapters of the dissertation. Chapter Two is my personal story that gives a retroactive look at my life in Trinidad leading up to my story of migration, and offers a critical assessment of my transnational Black identity. Chapter Three represents a literary construction of what was disclosed to me in conversation with the women. I use the literary to help shape the conditions of liming wherein these women *could* meet to talk about their experience, although they did not meet for this discussion. This technique is useful to shape the narrative and meaning-making inherent to their stories. Chapter Four analyzes our conversations in regard to my three research questions. In Chapter Five, I summarize the learning from our stories and chart a way forward as the women and I, and others who have shared our journeys, continue to make our way in and through the social, political, and emotional dynamic that is life in the U.S.

CHAPTER TWO

CITIZEN TO CITIZEN: WHO FEELS IT, KNOWS IT

“And if I speak of Paradise,
Then I’m speaking of my grandmother
who told me to carry it always
on my person, concealed, so
no one else would know but me.
That way, they can’t steal it, she’d say.
And if life puts you under pressure,
trace its ridges in your pocket.
smell its piney scent on your handkerchief,
hum its anthem under your breath”
Roger Robinson, *A Portable Paradise* ⁷

In the poem that introduces this chapter, British-Trinidadian poet Roger Robinson describes an aspect of his dual identities as an inner ‘paradise’ he can hold onto and retrieve when needed in the country where he resides, England. Paradise is used to describe a way of life, a quality of life, and a sense of knowing, as well as having a life that feels sacred. This felt-sense of home as sacred, travels with and within im/migrant bodies in the present so it can never be taken away no matter the circumstance. In this chapter, I convey significant aspects of my lived experience with paradise as I map my movement across the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, and within the United States.

⁷ This excerpt appears with the permission of Peepal Tree Press. Roger Robinson, *A Portable Paradise*, p. 81. See also, Appendix D.

This chapter is dedicated to two phases of my cultural existence: being Trinidadian and becoming American. I begin this narrative as a Trinidadian citizen and over a period of approximately 16 years, I become an American citizen. I use select vignettes and epiphanic moments to capture some of the significant turning points of my migration journey, which, in turn, speak to identity-shaping issues of in-betweenness, dislocation, citizenship as social belonging, articulations about home, and an awakening of my own racialized identity. I embody both of my identifications as a Trinidadian-American in different social locations with the profound cognizance that “a location can be a reduction” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 29). To be reduced to a location is to link positionality and identity within a particular historical experience. To do so negates understanding my subject position within diaspora as non-essentializing.

Percy C. Hintzen (2005) affirms that diasporic identity “connects people of African descent in a global web of racial intimacy” (p. 4). Thus, regardless of how we identify—as West Indian, Caribbean or Trinidadian (see Davies, 1994)—we must define ourselves individually and collectively in the spaces we occupy to remake and remember culture (Gilroy, 1993; Hintzen, 2005). By using critical autoethnography to document this im/migration journey, I recall and reflect on experiences, and what they have meant to my and others’ lives, in ways that have not felt, to me, to be possible in the past. I do so in ways that seek to reinvent and remember culture conspicuously, purposefully, and vulnerably (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Madison, 2012).

I begin the story by returning to two foundational elements of home—my homeland, Trinidad, and my family home where I lived for the first twelve years of my life. I focus on these locations to emphasize the genesis of a cultural re-mapping of my identity as movement through space where I experience different forms of in-betweenness in various social locations both there and here. My layered in-betweenness appears and matters in those spaces of cultural tension that

result because of issues related to displacement and dislocation. I draw attention to the “affectivity” and “temporality” of home (Ahmed et. al., 2003, p. 9) that attune with my experiences of mobility and movement long before I ever migrated to the U.S.

In Chapter One, I described critical autoethnography as a research process that emphasizes embodiment, emotion and interplays of power. In my story I draw readers’ attention to those embodied movements and felt experiences—moving away, moving on, moving forward, my self-moving through relational and cultural spaces—and even the very specific moments in which significant people in my life, such as my parents, direct me concerning how to move, or not move. I situate the story and the dissertation in this manner because it informs and reanimates my “perceptions of home, without then assuming home is fixed prior to the experiences of migration” (Ahmed et. al., 2003, p.8). Much like identity is a process of becoming (Durham, 2014; Hall, 2017), home involves myriad experiences that entail a process of making and remaking of selves over time. In these ways, my journey to citizenship is also a journey of identity (identities).

I structure this chapter with four main sections. The first section, “Life Before Migration,” provides background about my early life prior to moving to the U.S. and my reasons for leaving Trinidad. The second part, “Encountering the Diasporic Self,” narrates and works to deconstruct some significant experiences of difference while living in the U.S. The third section, “Performance as citizen: Living in Liminality,” documents my changing legal statuses and the emotionality that accompanies the process to citizenship. Finally, in “Repositioning Myself within Borders: Developing a Black Feminist Consciousness,” I explore the trajectory of my lived experience to make a statement about what it means to become a Black woman, citizen in the U.S.

Life Before Migration: From San Juan to New York

Growing Up Trini: The 1980s, 1990s and Somewhere In-Between

Three things have defined my life in growing up “Trini”: religion, education, and family. My cultural identity is woven into the fabric of my social enactments and interactions in the way I speak, my sense of humor, my mannerisms, and expressions. I love and embody the creole language⁸ and folk culture of my country. Trinidad is the country of my birth and my home for 19 years, and the land of ethnic diversity, liming, excessive public holidays, any number of joyous celebrations and festive cultural traditions to include Carnival, Holi, Diwali, Eid, and Christmas.

Christmas is one of the most important holidays in Trinidad and features a remarkable display of faith, fête, and family. Trinidadians prepare for the indulgent Christmas season several months in advance by purchasing new curtains, a large ham and making gift lists for all the children in the family. In my family, Christmas is a time to honor the birth of Christ. Christmas is the time of gift exchanges and rotating visits to family members homes accented with Poinsettia plants, busy aunts and mischievous uncles who tempt younger children with sips of beer or a taste of scotch. The most fun part for me was playing with my never-ending collection of cousins while greedily stuffing our mouths with snacks like *Planters* Cheese Balls and *Pasty's* Split channa placed orderly on the kitchen table. Christmas smells of freshly baked breads and coconut sweetbreads, ham, pastelles wrapped in banana leaves, sorrel smelling of spices (and sometimes spiked with rum for adults), ginger beer and, live parang music. Christmas and parang

⁸ The use of Creole here signals a local patois or dialect that is spoken among native Trinidadians. This specific dialect serves a function as a kind of coded language that makes it easy to recognize Trinidadians anywhere in the world.

are a holy fusion of festivity featuring a female vocalist, a serious faced Cuatro player with enviable fingered dexterity being cheered on by the sounds of a shack-shack⁹ and the occasional shouts of “Ayeeee” to signal the end of a song. All of these festivities were fed by a delightful overconsumption of alcohol. And when Christmas leaves, Old Years meets us all with obsessive cleaning while cooking black-eyed peas and rice seasoned with pig tails and garlic. Old Years leaves and on New Year’s Day we eat pork or salmon. The old people say, “don’t eat chicken because you’ll be scratchin’ for money the whole year.” While growing up in Trinidad, January 1st always feels like rebirth and spiritual cleansing performed together.

As a young girl I lived in two very different detached, single-family houses. I spent the first 12 years in San Juan and when my parents separated, and later divorced, I lived with my mother for seven years in Cunupia. I didn’t much like living in Cunupia, which was nicknamed ‘coolieville,’ a pejorative term to describe an Indian working-class community whose roots include indentured servitude, especially after the abolition of slavery in Trinidad. Mostly I was embarrassed to have been relocated to a place that seemed so unlike the one I had left. Yet, to openly speak of being embarrassed would be met with harsh reprimands about ingratitude. Instead, as a child, I would tell people I lived in Chaguanas, which was the next closest town that had, to me, some semblance of relatable civilization marked by ethno-diversity. My antagonism toward my mother’s house is reminiscent of the residual resentment I felt over my parents’ divorce. I never felt welcomed or at ease in this house, which was located in a residential community, similar to a gated community, called “Homeland Gardens.” There was nothing homelike about this place called “Homeland,” except for the minor detail that I lived there for seven years. In some childish way I always saw Homeland Gardens as a menacing place

⁹ The shack-shack in Trinidad is also known as the maraca in Venezuela.

separating me from my father both emotionally and geographically. But my parents' divorce isn't something I talk about much because it isn't a respectable topic of discussion, particularly for Catholics for whom divorce typically signals a religious excommunication and the inability to fulfill sacramental promises. Battered wives were expected to "grin and bear" their physical and emotional pain and somehow work it out with their husbands. After all, what would the neighbors say?

Respectability is an unspoken but distinct and influential understanding of class in Trinidad. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) uses the term "politics of respectability" to describe a "a cornerstone for racial uplift" (p. 145). An important Black feminist concept, a politics of respectability, therefore, frames how Black women can show they can be respectable amongst each other, and to white people. This kind of respectability politics often entails promoting values such as cleanliness, politeness, sexual purity and temperance (Higginbotham, 1993). Respectability often reinforced class distinctions in Trinidad where class is also closely tied to modesty, morality and the acquisition of commodities (see Bourdieu, 1986).

Class divisions dictate possibilities for our family and my social life. Class can be the affirmation of a particular financial status ("middle class") recognizable by property and car ownership, the location of housing, education, job, and income levels. Class can also become a social reprimand ("have a little class") if how you perform your identity (e.g., comportment, language, dress) does not align with your perceived class level. Directly connected to class is the issue of pride, a kind of slow death for Caribbean families and a generational smear in mine. Pride is a nucleus for families that dictated what could be said or done outside the privacy of the home. While it is perfectly acceptable to "have a little pride" in oneself, (false) pride was the reason many people would choose to suffer in silence.

My father reminds me of King Midas—anything he touched thrived (except for marriage). As a musician he played the guitar and piano. Chartered accountant by day, television repair man by night, green thumb kitchen gardener, curious chef—my father enjoyed resisting the confines of singularity and class assignments. Growing up in poverty, he was determined that his children would not be starting from zero and he began charting a new destination for himself and his family once my brother and I were born. My mother, a career banker, comes from a lower-middle class family and (still to this day) tries hard to please everyone around her. She believes we should always save face (as a matter of pride) when confronting adversity, no matter the cost. These differences between my parents became evident in their parenting and as their child I would pick and choose which beliefs I wanted to keep from either of them. But growing up Trini, “optional” is a subjective term as children are relegated to authoritative demands of their parent/s. I was reminded, often enough, that I am a child in their house, and I must (and will) respect my parents. Although this was an expectation, it most often felt, to me, like a stern command.

My social reality involves a value-laden class consciousness that resides in my childhood memories, which, in turn, contributes to my complex understandings of identity and family. In the early 1980s, I was mostly unaware that I was enjoying a privileged, middle-class life. I don't think we had a lot of money, but we always had more than enough. I was a sickly and bookish child who loved stories about Caribbean folklore, especially stories about soucouyants or shapeshifters, la diablesse, Papa Bois and Douens. Many of these folklores are cultural superstitions that still inhabit my spiritual consciousness.

Leisure time was a celebrated part of island life. In my free time, I enjoyed writing poetry, storytelling, foreign languages, parlor food, the beach and international travel. We had

passports before I turned five years old, and I can vividly recall traveling on Eastern airlines before BWIA and American Airlines were the only available options. I couldn't see it back then, that the taken-for-granted travel we enjoyed was just that for some people—an option. Such options were dictated by economics, but as a young child I did not carry those concerns.

Traveling was customary for our summer holidays, which were vacations we took with either dad or mom—never both at the same time. The few childhood photos I have left include my brother, my father and I exploring the U.S. or my brother and I with my mother visiting other Caribbean Islands like Curaçao and Margarita where we would go shopping for new clothes. I was under the impression that all families took summer vacations like ours. At the time I could not appreciate the gift of mobility and the ability to learn culture through travel. I also couldn't discern between knowledge and understanding. For example, I was accustomed to visiting America as a tourist-child, though I remained blissfully ignorant to the endemic of anti-blackness that existed there. It would not be until several years later, after I moved to the U.S., that I began to experience these issues first-hand.

To my memory, my family home in Trinidad stands out promiscuously as the best house in a progressively deteriorating neighborhood. Our house had a somewhat amusing address: instead of a house number, it was merely “Opposite pole 61.” The ‘pole’ was actually the light pole across the street, one of many along the roadside that lit Central Village. Our house always seemed, to me, to be oddly placed in this neighborhood surrounded by others whose homes appeared run down and in need of repair. We lived just off a main road and our house was fenced off and in between two neighbors who had latrines and outdoor showers. Ours did not.

My little Catholic, nuclear family: mom and dad, my brother and I reside in an approximately 3,500 square foot house built on a half-acre of land that was gifted to my father by

his father, Augustine. My paternal grandmother (Ma) and at least three of father's brothers lived within easy walking distance of our home. My father, Angelo, was a family man who surrounded himself with his family in this curious village. Along with these relational ties, one thing was certain: in Central Village, San Juan everyone knew everyone, and the same noxious superstitions polluted the air.

“Doh ever thief any breadfruit off Ms. Beryl tree or she will turn into a soucouyant at night and suck yuh.” This was my father's response when I asked him why so many people feared Ms. Beryl. Soucouyants are popular characters in Caribbean folklore, much like Anansi the cheeky spider. It seems ridiculous to think a human could turn themselves into a blood sucking vampire hag at night and magically return to human form in the dawn to exact revenge on an ill-mannered neighbor who stole fruit from her tree. It might have made more sense to simply say “don't steal, ask”; but in Trinidad, fear-based morals were taught by personifying the supernatural. It is hardly a surprise that I continue to live with these superstitions today.

Living in Central Village I was exposed to the weight of superstition, and to those of us who lived here, soucouyants are not mythical creatures, they are real. I absorbed too many of these superstitions, much to the chagrin of my mother, who like most of my family are “cradle Catholics.” To be a cradle Catholic means to unknowingly submit to an early baptism, a kind of religious inheritance bestowed upon me in the cradle to bear the responsibility of religion on my shoulders long before I could talk. Religion plays an important role in my family dynamic as faith (or a crutch), as practice, as a marker of identity. For my grandparents faith was devout—never miss Sunday mass, First Friday devotions and constant (if not endless) novenas for grandchildren who could only be saved by prayer. For my mother faith meant (and still means) “God will provide” and for my father faith meant “God will make a way.” As a child, faith meant

whatever these adults told me, and my faith-based practice was focused on racking up my sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation to keep my parents, aunties and uncles and grandparents proud. Much of these ritual acts bore little significance to me at the time.

My mother snubbed superstition and the myths in Central Village as being “ridiculous” lower-class performances. To me, there was always a blurred line between God and angels, devils, and demons: some devils (to me) were more easily recognizable than others. The devil is a fallen angel after all. I openly embrace these alternative spiritual beliefs and practices as a form of religious syncretism. Besides, what does it matter what religion claims God? I believe he exists, and that is enough for me. I dare not say this out loud to my parents since this would certainly earn me some Hail Mary’s in a Confession box. Confession was one highly suspect ritual of Catholicism I dropped as soon as I became an adult. I simply didn’t believe that some priest hiding behind a screen could absolve me from my sins. My sins were between me and God alone.

A radical departure from Catholicism, my paternal grandfather was said to be “Shango,” a deity in Yoruba religion brought to Trinidad during slavery. The Shango religion was known for ‘magical powers’ and my grandfather was rumored to be a ‘mechanic’—someone who knew how to fix things. Fact or fable, my devoutly Catholic grandmother was scared of him because “that man like too much obeah!” Obeah or voodoo are feared in Trinidad because of the warped association with witchcraft. The fear of the unknown scares most people but not my dad. And yet my grandmother had two children with my grandfather, although she did not marry him. I often wonder what that was like being widowed and pregnant in the 1940s. I have so many fragmented stories of my grandparents but no way of connecting them. All of my grandparents were dead before my 16th birthday.

My mother often remarks that it is because of my “panyol”¹⁰ blood that I internalize superstition but moreso, because my father and his mother (Ma) have “filled my head” with nonsense. And yet, the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in her home to this day is still the colonized white Jesus with long hair and blue eyes. To be fair, most of my Catholic family members have a version of this framed photo above our front doors to protect the inhabitants. Such embodied citizenship positions religion as a significant element to how I have come into knowing and understanding myself as a person whose morality is shaped by the secular, the sacred, and the spiritual.

Class Performances

Class performances often involved domestic labor. Trinidad is a highly patriarchal society and in spite of all of the patriarchal impositions (generally related to my gender), my class privilege allowed me to resist (and often avoid), normative gender labor. For example, in my home there was always someone we called a ‘maid’ or ‘helper’ to clean the house and do the laundry. It feels strange using the term ‘maid’ to address a female domestic, and the use of that term makes me wary given the negative stereotypes associated with the mammification of Black women (Collins, 2000), which I wouldn’t come to learn about much later in my life. Because we had a helper, I didn’t ever see domestic work as my responsibility and had no interest in any of it.

Growing up, I was made aware of the societal expectations regarding behavior for little girls and women by other women like my mother, grandmother, and aunties. There’s a cultural saying that Trinidadian mothers *raise* their daughters and *love* their sons. Essentially, girls like

¹⁰ The *Cocoa Panyols* refer to the Venezuelan migrants who inhabited the predominant cocoa growing areas in Trinidad, such as Santa Cruz which was less than 10 minutes driving from my home in San Juan. Moodie-Kubalasingh (2021) examines the cultural contribution of this group of people to Trinidadian culture through explorations of music (e.g., parang), prayers (non-traditional), and holistic medicine (‘bush medicine’).

me were trained to take care of the men in their lives long before we could grasp what that means and the cost of such an expectation. As a girl, it was easy to see how young girls became an extension of capitalist economic systems as evidenced by the emphasis on domestic labor in the Caribbean (Ho, 1999). Admittedly, in the realm of domesticity, my experiences failed in comparison to many of my female cousins.

On Saturday mornings I am up at the crack of dawn to beat my brother to the couch to watch Sesame Street and He-Man on our 10" Panasonic color television before Casey Kasem and Donny Simpson come on. There was no need to change the channel because, although there were two tuners (VHF and UHF), there were only two channels—2 and 13—that show the same programs. During the commercials, I rush to brush my teeth and dress. I am careful to pack my John Thompson's Theory and Music book in my backpack for my piano lesson. I crush the Crix in my plastic cup into the tepid Ovaltine I dislike but which my mother insists is 'good for me.' My brother eye-cues me that it's time. I take his Seven Seas cod liver oil capsules and he drinks my Ovaltine-yuck smush. We have had this agreement for years because he can't swallow pills and I hate warm 'tea' in the morning.

My mother hands me a bright yellow can of Pledge and instructs me to, "dust the shelves." I am smart enough to turn my back to her before rolling my eyes. The 'shelves' in question were space savers lined with small crystal and porcelain chachkas and lace doilies with the complete red and black hardcover Encyclopedia Britannica on the bottom. I was meant to remove every single encyclopedia, wipe them off and dust in between each book. I would only get through about one or two before I opted to huddle on the floor with the dust cloth in my hand

reading the encyclopedia instead of dusting anything. Why did I need to dust if the dust was only going to come back anyway?

Daddy comes into the living room dressed in his usual causal wear of shorts, a t-shirt with a pocket, leather sandals and, a small white, linen handkerchief for wiping sweat. Our car was not air conditioned at the time, so the only breeze we got was the warm air outside blowing in through the windows. It's time to go: piano lesson, music store, bookstore. Who needed to spend time dusting and cleaning when I could be playing music or reading a book? Not me, I say, not me.

I am thinking now of how mothers in my past lived experience reinforced the necessity of learning how to clean, how to cook, how to iron clothes in a similar fashion to Jamaica Kinkaid's (1978) description of women's labor in *Girl*. This working-class approach to work is one form of reiterating Black women's oppression even as young children. Patriarchy defines gender labor, gender roles, and gender space. To see young Black girls as domestic labor is to recognize how the Black mother woman (Lorde, 1997) participates in reinforcing the dominance and hierarchy of the patriarchy in the home (Covi, 2003). Although my father's leniency might have granted me some 'freedom' to circumvent housework, my mother insists I complete this work as part of my gendered duty in learning how to 'keep house.' In so far as I have been a child lodged between both my father and mother, I am most often agonizingly situated in-between the middle class and working class.

I am so bored. I can't think of what I can do, and I dare not even whisper that I'm bored because, as Ma says, "the devil always finds work for idle hands to do." The devil has to be the

busiest person I've never met. I have no new books to read. There is literally nothing to watch on television until 8 o'clock tonight. I hope there's a new Bud Spencer and Terrence Hill show on or I can catch Benny Hill if I don't fall asleep. Boredom is insufferable.

I wonder if it would be okay to go outside and call on Maria through the fence to come and play jump-rope or hopscotch? We always play jump rope by alternating jumping with my rope to see who could jump the longest without stopping. We played hopscotch on each of our respective sides of the dividing fence and never just at my house or hers. It wasn't allowed. I don't know why we never played together at my house and why I never thought to invite her over. Maybe I knew if I asked my parents—particularly my mom—the answer would have been a sharp “no” to me going to her house, and a polite “not today” to her coming over. My mom didn't like me associating with people who she believes live below our station. She is particular about who she thinks is good company to keep. As I peep through the louvres, I can see the faded newspaper comics patching the broken windows of my neighbors' house that were broken every time their father came home drunk. I didn't know that they couldn't afford to fix the broken windows any more than their father could afford to keep supporting the local rum shops. I heard from my father that their father was going blind and barely escaped being hit while walking in the street drunk on several occasions. As for their house, I suppose their father was willing to sacrifice aesthetics for personal pleasure. This wouldn't happen at my house. If anything broken could be visible from the outside, my mother would see that it was fixed at once. However, there was no quick repair for what was broken inside the house.

“Why do I need to know how to cook?” I asked my father who was busy rolling little flour dough into balls in his hand. Today we are making dhalpouri¹¹, which I love to eat but have no real desire in learning how to make. I admire how easily my dad used the flour balls to scoop up the ground chickpeas and fold it into the smooth dough. The kitchen often functions in my family as a cultural repository. My father always seemed at peace, reflective even, when he was cooking. We didn’t engage in the more commonly known “kitchen table talk,” which, for many Trinians, means vile local gossip or exaggerating some deplorable family drama and retelling it like an episode of *The Young and The Restless*. Rather, it was a place where traditions and knowledge got handed down through the preparation of food (see Davis, 1999). Without breaking his rhythm, he said half-jokingly, “If yuh don’t know how to cook, yuh man will kick up your arse.”

I couldn’t fathom being beaten by a man for not preparing a meal any more than I could imagine being married to a man who would beat a woman for not cooking. My father, by example, demonstrated to me that men are just as capable of doing so called “woman’s work” with ease. Nevertheless, that women were being beaten by men—their fathers, husbands, boyfriends—was hardly an unknown phenomenon, even in my household. The issue of domestic violence in my home was embarrassing to say the least. When the fighting between my parents would occur, someone would send for my grandmother who could calm my father. On one occasion, I intervened to stop him from hitting her. Even now as I write this dissertation, I could never reconcile this side of my father who was violent to my mother—his wife—with his gentle, loving self with me.

I eventually learned to forgive him and resigned myself to thinking that what adults do in a marriage is between them and cannot be compared to how they form bonds with their children.

¹¹ A traditional East Indian flatbread dish made with flour, ghee and chick peas.

It does not in any way mean that living through this and living with this kind of violence has ever been easy. In fact, in my adult life I have been accused by my mother of developing a kind of complicity to my father's abuse because I loved him dearly in spite of this flaw. I was merely a child, and I didn't know how not to see his humanness.

Education

I am the by-product of seven years of elite Catholic, secondary schooling in Trinidad in which admission is only made possible through scholastic achievement. When I did the national exam at the age of 10, I ranked in the top 5% in the island which opened the doors to this prestigious educational experience. In terms of the curriculum itself, much of my institutionalized (and colonized) education endorsed whiteness to the extent that I wasn't even aware of the absence of Blackness. Although my teachers were predominantly Black women, for those seven years of secondary schooling we studied mostly British and US American white male authors—John Steinbeck, William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Hardy, the exception, Virginia Woolf—and, only two Caribbean authors, Derek Walcott and V.S. Naipaul thrown in for good measure. We studied *Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston but none of my sheroes ever looked like me. Where were the Black women writers in my knowledge formation? Why weren't they included with the men we studied? At the time, I was certain I was being prepared for university by learning the classics. I suppose I might have assumed that if they were classical writers and literary geniuses, race didn't matter. However, I didn't know, nor could I have known, how this Euro-western programming was whitewashing crucial elements in my schooling. I had believed up until I left Trinidad that I could do anything or become anything

simply because I was smart, talented, educated. I was blissfully unaware of how wrong I was about these ideas.

I am 15 years old. I can't believe it. My CXC ¹² exam results came in today. I am first in my year for economics, and I have a merit award to show for it. I am shocked and damn proud of myself. I am brimming with pride and can't wait to tell my dad the news.

“What's the grade?” he asks as he reads the *Bomb*, a popular salacious, bacchanalist, and conspiracy-laden newspaper. He is seated on his favorite chair in the living room with his feet propped up on the coffee table. I am thrown off by his question, but I answer him honestly.

“It is a B.” He glances at me for a second and returns to his reading.

“Oh...” he chuckles. “It's not an 'A.' So you didn't do that good.”

Ouch. That stings.

“But dad, the highest grade in my entire school for the exam is a “B” which I got.”

“It's still a B. Someone, somewhere got an A. And that wasn't you.”

I struggle to fight back tears and obscenities. I am infuriated, hurt, and reeling in disappointment. *How can you be such an asshole? I dare not let those words escape my lips but seriously — would it kill you to congratulate me, to pretend you can see how much this means to me? How could you just rob me of this moment? I know it's not an “A.” An “A” to you means I am on top of my game, ahead of the class, a top student with high future potential. But a grade “B” stunk of mediocrity, and we couldn't have that.*

¹² The Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) is a diploma awarded to students' upon the successful completion of five years of secondary schooling of at least six subjects to include English Language, English Literature, Mathematics, one Science subject (e.g., Biology), one foreign language (e.g. Spanish or French) and Caribbean history. In my case, I also studied Principles of Accounting, Principles of Business and Economics.

I walked away from my father feeling defeated and disappointed that day. Sometimes I think I deliberately withhold sharing good news about my successes and achievements with other people because I don't ever want to feel like my best was somehow, inadequate.

In retrospect, I recognize that, although my father might have had good intentions, he couldn't see how his words humiliated me and negatively impacted my self-esteem. In fact, one year later I placed third in a national poetry competition and never told him about it. I didn't even keep the poem that ranked me in the top three poets in the country. I couldn't bring myself to face that kind of stinging disappointment again. My father might have wanted me to learn that although a "B" got me first place, to be first I needed to be the person with the "A." Maybe he was trying to prepare me to navigate the competitive world I would one day enter as a Black woman, and such complacency would destroy me. Maybe he felt that if he told me he was proud of my "B," that somehow I wouldn't be motivated to try harder or do better. Truth is, after that incident I began to second guess my academic and work abilities, my physical appearance, my choice in boyfriends. Even when I achieved a goal or a milestone, I would tell myself that it wasn't ever enough—do more, reach higher. If I was commended on a job well done, I would practically self-flagellate about the things I could have done to render it perfection. Nothing is ever good enough. Desperately, I wanted to prove—I needed to prove—that I could be better by doing more, doing better. I didn't fully swallow the myth of meritocracy but the nagging feeling of insufficiency while achieving haunted me. Even now, as I write this dissertation, I feel the pressure of continuously challenging myself to prove that my basic level of academic performance begins with excellence. Old habits die hard, I suppose.

Survival and the ability to navigate life were critical forms of educational instruction, since, as my father believes, “life isn’t learned in a classroom.” I can recall so many outings when I drove around Trinidad with my father, which became a way for me to learn the lesser traveled streets of my country. My mom would use the main roads, but my dad knew all the short cuts off the main traffic routes throughout the island, and he wanted me to become familiar with them. He always believed that “common sense comes before book sense” and that to thrive in this world I needed to learn how to balance both worlds. In my mind, I was being trained to manage conflict and navigate difficult circumstances in multiple ways. Life after all, is unpredictable.

Racialized Identity

Growing up in the early 1980s and 1990s, others did not refer to me as a Black woman or a Black girl and so I didn’t necessarily see myself as one. My friends, family members, neighbors, teachers, and political leaders who mostly looked like me, though there are shades of difference. The issue of colorism, a racially divisive hierarchical process that elevates whiteness over Blackness, was real (see Boylorn 2013; Holder, 2012; Hunter, 2002). You could be, as I was, a “brownin,” a “reds,” a “darkie”, a “pretty darkie” or “light skinned.” As a form of racialized stratification, colorism bestowed upon me, and people like me, a kind of reinforced social capital through the proximity of whiteness (Hall, 2017; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Matthews & Johnson, 2015; Wilder & Cain, 2011). I was comfortable in my own skin and didn’t necessarily think of having to own and name being a Black person or having a Black identity. For me growing up, it was a taken for granted existence.

I grew up being used to others calling me “a mix-up-something,” mostly because my father looked like he could be “a Spanish” (see Khan, 1993; Moodie-Kubalalsingh, 1994). I imagine being of mixed-ethnicity and avowing a Black identity complicates how some people understand race. However, some of my ethnic ambiguity is also relevant to my grandmother, whose maiden name is Diaz. All I know is she migrated to Trinidad from St. Vincent. Her first husband died and in Trinidad, she eventually had two more children with my grandfather, and later remarried. I did not have the foresight to probe her history prior to her death. It saddens me because, even as I write this, the La Soufriere volcano is erupting on the island of St. Vincent resulting in massive evacuations to neighboring islands of St. Lucia and Grenada. I wonder if I have any family left there, or if molten lava has now eviscerated a generation of family I never had a chance to know. I’ve always maintained some animosity to the practice of burying histories with the dead since, after all, dead people tell no stories.

Reasons for Leaving: Wanting More

About one year after I finished secondary school, I landed a job as a “VJ” (video jockey) for a reggae program at Trinidad’s first urban radio station, 98.9FM. I am very proud of this achievement because I got the job without using any of my parents’ connections. Also, not only was I the youngest, but I was the only neophyte who passed the audition. One year into my new radio career, the love I felt for the industry fueled my ambitions, which led me to apply to university in New York. I chose New York because I wanted to be within easy reach of all the media powerhouses. Over time I continued to fill my ambition with hope as part of my ongoing survival tool kit.

I want to make clear that my decision to leave Trinidad was purely and selfishly motivated. My leaving had everything to do with my own desire to discover what else could be possible outside of the island paradise I love so dearly. What kind of life exists in America? I wanted to experience what it was like to live outside of Trinidad, even if my time there might end up only being short lived. For me, the risk of uncertainty was worth the sacrifice of safety and complacency. I dreaded leaving my father behind since my parents had divorced several years before I left. I didn't want him to be alone. Yet, indeed, I desperately wanted to know what American university could teach me. Sure, I had travelled to the U.S. many times before on vacation, but this trip was different. This was a dream I dared to envision and materialize. In Trinidad, I imagined living in a Manhattan brownstone with 12-foot ceilings and large bay windows that poured all that good natural light into a room. My only point of reference at the time of what life could be like elsewhere were the magazines I would pick up from the shelves at the supermarket. Neither Google nor the Internet existed then.

While preparing for my departure, I packed my daydreams full of ridiculous reveries. I invested time imagining the new car I would be driving while blasting and singing Beres Hammond songs at the top of my lungs. My heart even skipped a beat just thinking of the potential rendezvous I could have when I finally moved into my own place away from parental scrutiny. I relished all of these fantasies however unrealistic they might have been at the time. A girl can hope.

I left Trinidad in 1994 feeling great anticipation, sadness, and excitement. I was leaving behind a country that, for me, symbolized safety and familiarity. I left Trinidad knowing that the next time I would return, I wouldn't be the same person who left. I allowed myself to simmer in

the illusion of a kind of perfectionist migration experience, meaning that whatever I had imagined would somehow come to fruition. At best, it is hard to imagine the unimaginable.

Encountering The Diasporic Self: Relocation and Dislocation

What Eh Meet Yuh Eh Pass Yuh¹³

“Are we poor?” I asked my mother when we arrived at our new “home” in the U.S.

My question discharged the Trinidadian mother’s hostile *cut eye*¹⁴ in disgust at my asking, which she most certainly saw as inappropriate. The meanness in her look also told me I needed to be quiet. But being quiet was difficult as I couldn’t understand this small, converted two-bedroom apartment in Jersey City, NJ which she seemed so enthusiastic for us to move into. I have never lived in an apartment before, and the confinement of this space was stifling. *Had I been deceived by false ideas that America promised a better life? This doesn’t feel like “better.”* For me, living in a third-floor walkup was definitely a step down. In addition, I became intimately familiar with public transportation—buses and trains—which I was most often shielded from in Trinidad because most times I was driven everywhere. Unlike Trinidad, in this new place, there was no car in the driveway. In fact, there was no driveway. I don’t know how to make sense of these seemingly trivial differences. My memories of home overwhelm me in this new place. *Had I allowed myself to be seduced and deluded by a migration fantasy?* This kind of thinking only nurtures, for me, the type of yearning that inevitably guarantees disappointment by reality. This new reality was hitting me like a ton of bricks. *What have I gotten myself into?*

¹³ If you haven’t experienced something yet, your turn will come in the future.

¹⁴ Side eye

Starting over is beginning something new. Anything new might be labelled as something “different” until the feeling is experienced as something explainable. I understand my migration experience this way because of all its newness—an initial sensation of difference. I know many people have migrated before me and they likely experienced similar kinds of emotions; but I am struggling with this unfamiliarity, with the newness. Something new can be alluring, and even tempting. In this moment of writing, I think about my first kiss, my first love, my first love making. As a young girl I had imagined what falling in love might be like but, until I experienced it, I had no way to truly know. It could have been better or worse than I had imagined. Yet, because it was better, I was seduced into believing. Had it been worse, I might have experienced disappointment, resentment. Either way, what is new leaves a mark, a memory that demystifies the imagination.

I wasn't prepared for my new journey to U.S. I packed some things, mostly of sentimental value—e.g., the dried floral broach I wore at my graduation ceremony, the card my best friend made me when I turned 18, the gold school ring bought for me by my father, some letters, a porcelain jewelry box with a hand painted hibiscus given to me by a friend, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin (1956) that I stole from my grandparent's library and *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Book of Verse* edited by Paula Burnett (1986). In addition, I brought some of my tropical wardrobe of shorts and sleeveless tops that were useless during the Winter, which is when we arrived in New Jersey. Huddled in a winter coat and diasporic hybridity, I did not feel at home in my new location. In fact, I never felt stranger. I felt like a *tick tack* in a whale's mouth: mostly out of place and indisputably, quite lost.

In leaving Trinidad, I packed my naiveté alongside my optimism, reducing my ambitious expedition to a goal of simply attending University for an education. I was woefully ignorant to the American college selection lexicon that would have potentially stirred different options or at least considerations that may have included HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) or Ivy League colleges and universities. I did not know about these schools to focus my energies there. Every now and then I wonder what my life might have been like I had chosen differently. Would my social and professional network reflect a larger diversity pool? Would I have joined a Black sorority? I chose my schools based on their Communication program and proximity to New York City. I ought to have known better, but, then again, in addition to my naiveté, information networks were limited in the pre-internet era in the mid-1990s.

The very act of leaving my home in Trinidad stirred in me a paradoxical sense of delight and discomfort. I felt all the excitement of embarking upon a new and uncertain adventure, while shelving the conflicting ambivalence and anticipation of having to adjust to life in a new country almost six times the size of my native country. I was not looking forward to winter after living on a tropical island for my entire life. I also dreaded being away from my friends and family. Up until my departure, home was a fixed place, a familiar memory, a specific and tangible location to which I could return. The act of departure, of moving across borders, meant that, although I had “a destination, an itinerary,” an anticipated future even, my understanding of home was about to shift to an ambiguous somewhere else, because of where I was going” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 78). I came to the place I had dreamed of visiting and I needed to create a new homeplace (Aranda et. al., 2014).¹⁵ I resisted the idea of recreating home for a long time by thinking of this new interim location in America as nothing more than temporary.

¹⁵ In “Making a Life in Multiethnic Miami”, Aranda et. al. (2014) use the term “translocal placemaking” to describe how new im/migrants seek to reproduce a translocal home in the host country (p. 261).

When I moved to New York, I landed in an uncertain future. Little did I know, I had embarked on also locating new possibilities of home as I gradually began to release the notion that home is where my family lives (Ahmed, 2000). The stories I convey next show the affect of transnational blackness on im/migrant identity by examining how blackness is enacted and performed in my encounters and experiences. They are my narratives of the stranger accompanied by understandings of strangeness.

Foreign Identities

The International Student Experience

He: “What is your escape story?”¹⁶

He was a white, male student in my African novel class. I was a 19-year-old college freshman at a University in New York. I was new to the United States in my new role as student. My former role was tourist. When this student posed his question, I didn’t understand it. I mean, I understood (linguistically) what he asked, but I couldn’t translate his intention to attribute meaning.

He: “What is the story of how *you* came to be here? Were you seeking asylum, or did you come here as a refugee? What made you flee to the United States?”

What made him think I was escaping anything? There are many things I wish I knew to say to that white student when he mis-categorized me. There are so many things I wish he could

¹⁶ This section “The International Student Experience” is an excerpt from the article, “Surviving from the Margins, A Conversation About Identity with James Baldwin” by Anjuliet G. Woodruffe, 2021, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 13, p. 462. Copyright 2020 by Copyright Holder. Reprinted with permission. See Appendix C.

know about me. First, I am not depraved. I chose to attend an American university and my family is paying this extravagant bill at a conversion rate of \$6 to \$1.¹⁷ Second, I want him to know that Black people have passports, and we travel like anyone else not only when kidnapped and enslaved. Finally, I was taught that if you have nothing polite to say you should be quiet.

I wish I could have known how I might have been misread to have been better prepared for such an encounter. That way, instead of the mindless utterance that escaped my lips —that “I flew on American Airlines”— I might have dared to ask him what stories about people who looked like me was he holding in the dark spaces of his white imagination. I would have liked to know what cruel investments he had in my humanness that offended him so much that he would attempt to insult me so personally. I wanted to dismiss the perniciousness of his comment but the same way we never forget our first broken heart or the betrayal of a close friend, I cannot simply let go of someone who might have deliberately been trying to marginalize me without knowing anything about me. The condescension in his demanding tone wanting to know *how I came to be here* coupled with the intonation in his voice when he played roulette while labeling my im/migration status “refugee” and “asylum seeker” sickened me (Woodruffe, 2021, p. 462). This kind of essentializing was a type of forced race assimilation that assumed who I was based on the color of my skin. In 1995, I was too intimidated to consider an educated or even clever response which might have interrogated his assumptions about people who looked like me. I am not even sure if at that time I fully understood how deep these assumptions were seeded in American society. However, as a stranger to the country, I didn’t know what kinds of possible repercussions would befall my resistance. By 2021, I learned to decode the cipher of racism under less foreign skies.

¹⁷ This number is approximate as there is a floating rate of exchange for the Trinidad and Tobago Dollar to the U.S. dollar. The current exchange rate is approximately \$6.75 TTD to \$1 USD.

My Trinidad accent has been rated one of the sexiest in the world (Burchette, 2014). Yet, a speech and debate judge once had the nerve to express disdain over my pronunciation of the letter “t” in the word “often.” The sound of my “t” led this white, male judge entirely too much discomfort (see Woodruffe, 2021). Clearly, I didn’t “sound American.” I cannot help but note the irony of my needing to choose which of my colonizers’ (British or American) linguistic preferences is most appropriate, or inappropriate, within my social location when I interact with them. To be Black in diaspora is to be a part of so many historical ‘uprootings’ and, still, this white man seemed to feel obligated to put me in my place; and in doing so, he used the sound of my words to indicate and accentuate my difference, and to use my difference to further mark my foreignness.

I feel all of those emotions associated with my difference today as fiercely as I did in 1995. However, the feelings have intensified in 2021 given the current climate of anti-blackness in the U.S. and murder of Black people by the police. As I write this, I am reminded that George Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin two months after Breonna Taylor was killed in her home (Oppel et. al, 2021). Justice has not been served in either case although Chauvin has been found guilty on all counts.¹⁸ I can’t help but wonder: what does a Black body do to stir in a person such fear and hate? I ask this question now, as I did before: “what makes my difference such a problem?” when the real problem is “the failure to recognize, acknowledge and embrace

¹⁸ Derek Chauvin is the police officer from Minneapolis, MN who was seen placing and holding his knee on George Floyd’s neck for over 9 minutes. The viral video sparked global outrage over the treatment of Black people by the police. In April of 2021, NPR reported that Chauvin was found guilty of unintentional second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter.

difference” (Woodruffe, 2021, p. 465). What kind of work is needed to facilitate change that can make difference, accepted?

At this moment, I do not have an answer. Recent retaliations against Critical Race Theory and moves by senate Republicans to enact policy in Florida to resist causing white people “discomfort” by teaching the truth about how race is enacted (e.g., segregation) suggests that, for many, racial divides will always be a more desirable option to equality.

Performance as Citizen: Living in Liminality

The Foreign Worker

“This time nuh like time before.” This common Trini expression signals a turning point in our lives. How does a person begin to conceptualize the U.S. first as a home, and then as a citizen, when our ability to belong has always been linked to conditions within specific time frames? After graduating university, I benefited from a company sponsored work visa (H1-B) that allowed me to legally work in the U.S. exclusively for that company. Without a doubt, I felt privileged that my company filed the paperwork for me, which, in doing so, demonstrated for me and U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services (UCIS) that there was “no other American” who could do this job. I do question the validity of this statement, but there were any number of justifiable qualifiers that could deem me exceptional, to include my nationality, my gender, my race, and my education. Nevertheless, the pride I felt as a foreign worker was in tension with the common perception that claims im/migrants are “job stealers.” I detested the essentialization that im/migrants are not only thieves but “illegals” when we too, are just trying to make a living. Such derogatory generalizations perpetuate the persistence and existence of racial inequality

committed against people who, like me, fell outside the dominant group of born Americans (see Gay, 2006; Gramsci, 1957; Hall, 1986).

Although I was a foreign worker, I lived in the U.S. *as though it were home*. I had a well-paying job, a two-bedroom apartment in a rapidly gentrifying Harlem (an historical neighborhood in New York City), a small but supportive network of friends and work colleagues. In these living, working, and socializing spaces complicated by vulnerable statuses, varying forms of disciplinary power in the form of immigration policies regulated my visible body. As a form of panopticism, immigration policies bring “the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements” (Foucault, 1984, p. 206). These policies determine where my body can go, what it can do and for how long, while simultaneously outlining the punitive consequences for non-compliance. In a split second, my body can be in/validated. When bodies come to be in this way, it often leads to feelings of isolation. Such isolation can be contextualized as geographical (away from homeland), cultural (distanced from the familiarity of culture) and relational (social bonds and interactions in the new country). This experience of vulnerability co-existing with isolation greeted me in the airport at U.S. Customs and Border Patrol approximately one month after I returned from my father’s funeral, one year after 9/11.

“Why are you entering the United States?” asked the Customs and Immigration officer. I am suddenly inappropriately overcome with emotion in this moment and in this space. I feel as though I am about to burst into tears. My vulnerabilities are seeping through my pores as my mind-body-spirit moves across borders. My company sponsored H1-B visa allows me to legally stay in the U.S. Except, I quit my job a year after my father died and had not fully considered the legal ramifications of that act for validating my presence in the U.S. It is October 2001 and after

9/11, the U.S. tolerance for outsiders is minimal. I want to tell this officer, this stranger with whom I am grieving the loss of my father who died a year ago. I want to tell him that I just went home to settle my father's estate and I am coming back to the U.S. to get my life organized. However, I don't yet know what that means because the weight of grief following my father's death is all consuming. *What would you if you were in my position?* I know that telling him this would have no effect on him, but I wish he could have the capacity to care. I wish he could see my humanness and in turn, be a compassionate person. I carried the burden of grief into this mechanical, authoritative space and, eventually, I blurt out that I am no longer at my company and I am returning to the U.S. to prepare to leave it permanently. One lie, one truth. The immigration officer looks at me, and with a grand gesture he marks two profound lines across my H1-B visa and proclaims, "you don't get to choose to live here or work here."

Just like that, I was canceled. My burgeoning new status became: *What do I do now?* My ancestors are teasing me in a hushed whisper: *crapaud smoke yuh pipe, gyal.*¹⁹

The Canceled Work Visa

My H1-B visa that gave me a legal right to work was canceled right in front of me. I grew increasingly nervous. I had to be cautious about who I told because now I am officially out of a legal status, and am unsure what I will do for work. My tourist visa is still valid for a few months, but it would require me to be in Trinidad for renewal. I couldn't bring myself to imagine what the stigma of deportation would feel like if it came to that. *What would I even do if I returned to Trinidad now? After coming of age in the U.S., how could I be expected to permanently return to a place that no longer held a home for me?* The rational and panicking

¹⁹ You're in deep trouble, girl.

thoughts in my mind expanded to an even bigger worry: Who can I safely trust with my particular problem? For my own safety, I just carry the secret with me where it lives like the blood in my veins that I mostly don't see but sometimes feel. Americans have a secure status with respect to citizenship, what could they understand about my trials? I have become so suspicious of others in my uncertain status to the point where I now even deem *myself* suspect. In the meantime, I believe the less I tell, the less anyone would know. If I keep my relational circle small and don't disclose anything, I can feel less unsafe.

I learned how to keep secrets. Actually, in some ways, I led a secret life for a long time. (I return to this issue below). The elders in Trinidad had (and still today have) a way of suggesting that the ancestors “show up for you” when you most need them. Historically in the U.S., Black women have tended to practice secret keeping as a counter-narrative to the controlling images and negative stereotypes they confront about their womanhood (Collins, 2004; Hine, 1989). Darlene Clark Hine (1989) addresses the relationship between Black women and the larger society as being “adversarial” (p. 915). To protect their gender vulnerability status, Black women learned to adopt false identities as a kind of dissonance to gain some respectability in their private lives. Hine further emphasizes the role of secrecy for Black women that allows them a “self-imposed invisibility” so that they could “accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle” (p. 915). Unknowingly, by adopting their survival toolkit, I had joined them. The ability to hold onto the intimacy of one's psychic space often tends to translate to the embodied affect of keeping secrets.

The [Embodied] Affect of Ominous Secret Keeping

Secret keeping is typically critical to survival when you are an im/migrant with a vulnerable legal status. These are ominous secrets that have severe consequences for the secret holder. Ominous secrets are at once threatening and provoking. Ominous secrets swell with silence as they travel and hold tightly the fragile futurity of hope. Ominous secrets are not just held, they are buried. For the secret holder, only if the secrets are buried can they be safe and protected. *How does a body that protects a secret (with its life) live among ordinary people?* You just do. Only a person who knows what can be lost in disclosure knows how to bury secrets so they can never be exhumed. Even after we have been told that it is safe to “unhide” yourself, we are still reluctant to expose our secrets, because we know that what came before can determine what happens next.

I cannot let my guard down. Every utterance, every spoken word is always carefully selected. I became an expert in the art of deception, lying by omission even to my lovers with whom I lay bare naked. Truth disclosures could lead to betrayal. No one must know. I cannot trust anyone. Once I disclose the truth about my status, I am completely dependent upon someone else’s trust. *How will they receive the news? Who might they tell? What are the material realities attached to their (re)telling? An ICE raid? Incarceration? Rape while incarcerated? Rape followed by deportation? How much humiliation does one human being grasping for a chance at a better life deserve?* In between my words are all of my silences. All of these silences that break my heart. To live in a vulnerable status is to be emotionally unavailable while living with heartbreak. And even while my heart is breaking—as disorienting as that may be— I am still secretly hoping that everything will work out the way I want it to. These secret

hopes fuel a kind of excitable ambition at the “prospect of the change that’s gonna come,” which Lauren Berlant (2011) terms “cruel optimism” (p. 2).

Cruel optimism, Berlant (2011) writes, is a condition “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your own flourishing (p. 1). She uses sense and feeling as an organizing strategy to attend to the realities of our everyday living by juxtaposing relational encounters as difficulty and possibility. How do my fantasies of what a U.S. citizenship can do intimately influence my understanding of citizenship and belonging in the U.S.? In other words, by examining the embodied and sensual nature of attachment to possibility (e.g., acquiring citizenship), we can also understand our desires as problematic investments which can result in loss. What is the embodied affect of acquiring a citizenship that both arouses and agitates? When fantasies of having a U.S. citizenship fuel fantasies of belonging, these same fantasies can become exhaustive if after citizenship is attained, the reality of citizenship fails to match the fantasy? Berlant’s perspective inspires a line of questioning related to affective citizenship that could investigate the ways that naturalized im/migrant women like me deploy strategies of survivance while facing the impossible threat of denial of a U.S. citizenship. The cost of this attachment is fear, uncertainty and ultimately disappointment. Like any investment, we don’t merely want back what we put in, we want more. In this way, we don’t merely want to survive. We want to prosper. It is not unreasonable then to ask: *Why do we persist in the quest for citizenship if we are so conflicted about what we are giving up by entering into something new and incalculable such as this?* Desires for citizenship are often driven by a need to help us take care of our families in our native countries and ourselves in the host countries. This form of familial care enforces a need-based sense of *duty* driven by economics, so that we form intimate relationships with *Western Union*. Many im/migrants make decisions based on obligation that not

only deeply frustrates us, but that can become emotionally erosive over time. As long we continue to live here and have families living in our home countries, there is a cultural expectation that we will always continue to help. The guilty perception is that no matter how bad it might be for us here in the U.S, it is worse for them.

Berlant theorizes that our attachments even to ideas of having a U.S. citizenship are “promises and not possessions” (p. 112). These promises manifest as change; that is, as “an impact lived on the body before anything is understood” (p. 108). From a dream invoked, we begin to embody the dream deferred (Hughes, 1951), the promise of something more. Thus, this cruel optimism invites an understanding of the precarity of our political-social selves as felt and embodied.

The Permanent Resident

“Why so sad, dimples?” my friend Pat asks me as we sat on familiar bar stools in mid-town Manhattan. I had been mulling over the impending nightmare of my canceled visa status and wrecking my brain for a solution. I keep chewing the top of my red cocktail straw lingering between the few remaining ice cubes in my drink, a Stoli-raz and club with a splash of Cran. I stop chewing for a minute but keep stirring my drink.

“Not sad, I’m just disappointed.” I pause for a minute trying to decide if I should trust him with the details woven into my crucible of disdain. I’ve known him for nine years, but even though I’d usually trust him with most things, as I’ve previously shared, my trust is wavering at the moment.

“I talked to my mom about my situation. She said it’s probably time I return to Trinidad, because maybe I have ‘reached my hand too high.’ Can you believe that? She said she can’t help

with my Green Card sponsorship.” *Can’t or won’t?* The truth is, I didn’t have the disposition to argue with my mother on this issue. However, I am almost certain (and I *needed* to believe), given that she had her permanent resident status, she could have, and would have, petitioned to sponsor the legal citizenship process of her child.

I feel like my back is against the wall. I am months away from becoming undocumented and I need to make a life-altering decision. I’ve discreetly navigated my work environments to remain employed, but immigration laws are changing and now demand people like me to produce tangible proof of our eligibility to work. I can’t shape-shift immigration litigation indefinitely. On one level, if I stay in the U.S., unless someone sponsors me, I might never be able to return to Trinidad. On another level, if I return to Trinidad, I will be starting over, again after a decade of absence, four years after the death of my father. *What do I do? I don’t have a home to return to. What would I even do if I landed back in Trinidad tomorrow? I cannot be certain about housing accommodations or even employment as a matter of fact. Yes, I will be closer to my brother again, but he’s married now and has his own life. How will I survive in a country that has in so many ways now become foreign to me? Things are not the same. If I were to return home soon, I would have no option but to start completely over again. What would it mean to begin again in a place where I would no longer be sheltered or shielded, that had become essentially, unfamiliar? This kind of inchoation is overwhelming. I am afraid to linger with these thoughts for too long, because I feel a slow depression wanting to seep in. I can feel my slow anxiety morphing into a mounting terror. How did I get to this place? What will become of me?* The pressures of this decision-making process tug on the muscle at the nape of my neck. I have moved from chewing the straw to now chewing the inside of my bottom lip and squeezing

the inside of my left palm with my thumb and index finger the way I do when I am upset, thinking and strategizing. I look up into my friend's ever-optimistic face.

“So, what do we need to do?” he asks.

We? I was momentarily perplexed by his self-inclusion into my dilemma. There is only one thing left to do. I am an unwilling, though, desperate co-conspirator. My first impulse is to manage my pride and say no. This is not the way I imagined it. I think of the sacrifice he is willing to make to give me a chance at building a life and although I question his motives, I am reluctantly overcome with emotion. And, then so softly, in nothing more than a quiet hum, I can hear my dad strumming his guitar as his voice sings to me: “It’s only one chance you have to take, take it now before it’s too late.”

I look into Pat’s face and force an uncomfortable smile. He looks adoringly into my worried eyes and places his hand on mine and says, reassuringly, “I’ll make sure you’re ok.” I didn’t want him to make sure I am ok. I am not his responsibility. And yet, in these crucial moments when my pride wants to dominate, I encourage common sense to usher in and silence my doubting avatar, replacing the “I don’t” for “I do.” I chose to remind myself that we’ve all done things out of necessity. This is the moment where “choice is born” (Walcott, 1986, p. 39).

Sometimes when you’re pushed that close to the edge of the ledge, you simply must jump off and tell yourself that you’re not at all falling. You are soaring like the phoenix gliding through the sky with angels.

On Becoming [a] Citizen

On May 24th, 2010 I became an American citizen. I still have in my possession, a letter, written and signed by President Barack Obama congratulating me and lauding this step as being

representative of the “promise of the American Dream” where this “great Nation” is now “my Nation.” This great nation. My nation. I wanted to absorb those words like a thawing oiled body lying on the beach at the beginning of Summer. I wanted to feel that profound and sunny sense of pride and patriotism. I was so eager, willing even, and I desperately tried to surrender to that moment; but the mind-body disconnect that governed this moment was far too wide. The truth is, I didn’t know how to feel about this performative act or have a script for how to act during the performance. By this time, I had become so numb to anything that sounded like “immigration,” that I simply didn’t have the bandwidth to summon some counterfeit patriotism.

I could smell the pride that accompanied the star-glazed eyes of the newbies within my sight. I could feel the anticipation of a new life in the air while being keenly aware of the hierarchal power in that room. I watched the scene by observing those who were there to remind us foreign-born people that they were giving us something we should be grateful to receive. I swallowed the lump in my throat with the bitter taste of history that reminded me how colonizers always pressured the colonized to feel gratitude.

The officials who led the ceremony asked all of the two hundred new citizens to place our right hand on our chest and say the Pledge of Allegiance while looking at the U.S. flag. Subconsciously during the ceremony, I began, “I solemnly swear to dedicate my life...” and I caught myself, Trinidadian en route to American. I lowered my eyes but kept my head in the direction of the flag. Even now, in this moment, mid-performance, in the very act of doing and becoming a citizen— when I should be the most present— I am first Trinidadian, then American. I snatched my thoughts back into the present space. I performed a lip sync that the infamous group of the 1980s Milli Vanilli would be proud of and mouthed, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.” In pledging my allegiance to this flag, James Baldwin (1965)

cautions me to remember that this flag did not pledge allegiance to me. This moment became such a deliberate act of ventriloquism. After 16 years of living in the U.S. as a non-citizen, and 11 years as an American citizen, I still didn't know what it meant to be American and, still today, I wonder what it means. More specifically, what does it mean to be a Black Trinidadian-American, woman, citizen?

It is hard to conceptualize, decipher and articulate my relationship with America and America's relationship to me as a Black woman, a Trinidadian and naturalized American. For so many years living in the U.S., I had been subjected to the language of the outsider, the other, the alien. The language of immigration is alienating. As Sarah Ahmed (2000) writes, the "alien" "is only a category in a given community of citizens; as the outsider inside the alien takes on a spatial function...aliens allow the demarcation of spaces of belonging: by coming close to home" (p. 3). To come close to home suggests that I am still not home and, least of all, I am not at home. Cognitively, I am aware that a space has been created for me in this country I was told I could call home. Why didn't it feel more welcoming (see Celeste, 2017)?

Until the moment of becoming [a]citizen I had been cast as a vulnerable member in a highly politicized immigration system (e.g., an international student, a foreign worker, a permanent resident), a person whose identity was marked by an approved legal status. As a cast member in this political theatre of vulnerability, I have unwillingly been subject to a set of performances that those of us with alien statuses must perform in-between spaces (Bhabha, 1994) in their day-to-day lives as they navigate aggressive immigration regulations. For 16 years, my identity was defined by the regulatory power of immigration policies.

I had imagined this moment differently. Teary-eyed, maybe? Joyous, at least? Instead, all I felt was impatience vying for relief. *Why wasn't I more... happy? Had all the experiences of*

renewable, disposable statuses depleted and suppressed my ability to be jubilant on this auspicious occasion? Why, even as I am being sworn in, am I half-expecting something to go dreadfully wrong and derail this process? Why is this act of citizenship so burdensome when it is intended to grant me freedom? Ahmed (2010) writes that “the gap between affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects, which are directed by the modes of explanation we offer to fill this gap” (p. 37). My desire to become an American citizen was need-based and by commodifying the value of citizenship, I devalued the emotional weight of acquiring it. Thus, these “anxious narratives of self-doubt” contribute to my becoming an “affect alien” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37) in those moments where becoming a citizen, somehow failed to stir happiness or excitement in me.

Until this very moment of divulging these past experiences, I didn’t realize how conflicted I have been regarding becoming a U.S. citizen. Although I didn’t have to renounce my Trinidadian citizenship to become an American citizen, the act of swearing in reminded me of the potential permanence of this choice and a newfangled need to prove that I belong here after a decade of proving I am worthy enough to stay here. Perhaps my writing through and about these arduous and emotionally depleting moments is a revolutionary act, a kind of resistance to being disciplined and used as institutional cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).²⁰ My becoming a citizen now granted me access to economic capital (e.g., work) and political capital (e.g., voting). However, within these disciplinary confinements masked as freedoms, this citizenship operates “not only in constructions of identity and belonging, struggles over recognition, and the politics of participation and contribution, but also in regulating access to scarce resources and institutionalizing difference” (Bauder, 2008, p. 316).

²⁰ This moment encapsulates the epiphanic and transformative potential in writing and research that uses autoethnography as a method of inquiry. I return to this topic in Chapter Five.

I felt an indescribable incompleteness after I became a citizen. In fact, I still feel this way. I feel that the “need” for a legal citizenship overran any desire for it and, as a result, I feel limp, spent, exhausted. It is all quite effortlessly, anti-climactic. Now that I have a legal citizenship, I feel new pressures to perform the act of “good citizen.” Had I even passed as “American” long enough to be accepted, even barely, as one? It is hard to reconcile the feeling of never actually being American, but appearing to some to be one, and seeming to others to be less authentically so. Once more, I struggle with the irreconcilable tensions of having a legal right to belong and longing to feel as though I belong.

When the swearing in ceremony finished, I took the next available train from East Islip, New York back to Manhattan and scheduled an appointment at the Post Office the following day to apply for a passport. When I became a citizen, I was forced to surrender my Green Card. Without it, I needed a U.S. passport to travel, for without a passport I would be trapped in the U.S. I couldn’t fathom not having the freedom to leave. Isn’t it strange or perhaps unfortunate, that the first thing I wanted to do when I was finally granted legal access to stay, was to leave?

To qualify for U.S. citizenship, I could not afford the luxury of mediocrity. I could not be ordinary. I couldn’t be an average American. I had to prove that not only was I better than average, but that I had *intentions* to be a better, more “productive” member of society. My taxes apparently were proof that I had good intentions. The struggle for citizenship is not merely about political and economic power, but the affect of power and control on im/migrant bodies. How does my presence affect Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and how am I affected by them? Every single thing I do is both calculated and suspect until the moment of citizenship. And even when I am finally a citizen, I continue to need to justify my place among other American

citizens who place me either below or apart from their privileged status. *Didn't I just have to prove that I am not just good, but better than they are?*

While living in Trinidad, I don't remember having any kind of recognizable affective response to being a citizen. I suppose that because I was a native-born citizen of the country, I had taken my citizenship status for granted. Citizenship wasn't a status I needed or aspired to attain. My parents participated in political processes (e.g., voting) but we never openly discussed politics in our home, because party line oppositions also existed in my home and the divisiveness could lead to significant fallout. I would go with my father to vote and understood his alliances, but I never knew for certain whose side my mother was on.

Growing up, I would hear shop talk about Venezuelan border crossers who would enter the country illegally. Such narratives about illegal border crossings didn't make much sense to me prior to my own experience in the U.S. as the outsider-within (Collins, 1986). To the foreign born there are few pathways to becoming a citizen: by marriage, sponsorship by parents who are citizens or through employer sponsorship. When you don't know these rules coming in, you may find yourself having to make decisions based on distinct and particular knowledge gaps which leaves you feeling helpless. We have a saying in the Caribbean that is relevant: *who feels it, knows it*. Until I felt what it is like to be an outsider trying to find her way in, I'll admit, I didn't know anything.

When I first moved to the U.S., I didn't have a sense of an "American Dream" so I couldn't be seduced by the ideology that accompanied it. I did, however, have a sense that I could do something more with my life here; although at the time I also couldn't gauge how realistic these fantasies were and how they could possibly materialize. I didn't even want to tell

myself any stories that could fuel chasing a foolish reverie. I couldn't fathom enduring any lingering affect of having to grieve, again, leaving yet another home.

I lived almost sixteen years of my life in the U.S. in vacillating precarity. Instinctively, I knew I could do something meaningful with my life in a prestigious career, but my body was plagued by a gut-level suspicion that no matter how qualified I am—a high performing student, a model employee, a model resident—there was never any guarantee of attaining citizenship. The quest to U.S. citizenship is a one-way street, an unreciprocated relationship. Nevertheless, I acknowledge how my own complex relational identity construction is magnified because I am a Trinidadian seeking American-ness, and I am American holding onto Trinidadian-ness and my social location often informs when I am more or less Trinidadian or American. I am never not both, although in some circles, I am a reduction of one or the other. To envisage any future, I must remain hopeful. Im/migrant stories, stories of citizenship are always juxtapositions of cruel optimism and the audacity of hope (Berlant, 2011; Obama, 2006).

Repositioning Myself Within Borders:

Developing A Black Feminist Consciousness

When I moved to the U.S. for university, I came face to face with the American ideology of anti-blackness and xenophobia, although it took a long time to become visible to me. I didn't see how this self-chosen exodus landed me in the middle of a transnational entanglement along with all the complexities of being "raced" in America that I had not known existed at that time. In this way, these two subject positions converge and conspire as *transnational blackness* (Celeste, 2017), the sort of blackness that involves the definitions, framing and experiences of blackness in the context of race, representation, citizenship and belonging. Conceptually,

transnational blackness examines the intersections of space and place on belonging as it relates to im/migrant identity in the context of social citizenship (Celeste, 2017).

Why did it take me so long to develop a Black feminist consciousness? In a conversation with Dr. Aisha Durham (A. Durham & A. Woodruffe, personal communication, November 11, 2021), I was reminded that I wasn't slow to developing a black feminist consciousness. Rather, up until the time I moved to the U.S. my Black identity performances were taken for granted and to large extent, normalized in Trinidad. However, the U.S. reminds us of the exceptionalism associated with blackness so that when immigrants land in the U.S. from other countries, we are now joined with U.S. Blackness which is not a familiar lived experience, and it causes a kind of differential.

In an earlier vignette, when I was asked about my escape story as an undergraduate and penalized for not subordinating to American English in forensics, I believed that interaction had everything to do with my status as a foreigner as a result of my being marked by differences in my accent (Woodruffe, 2021). I didn't see how my race and gender were implicated in these attacks. In addition, I have experienced similar problems in my lived experience. For instance, in 2009, while waiting to be interviewed for a Human Resources position, the hiring manager walked into the lobby and confidently approached the frumpish white girl sitting across from me with my résumé in her hand and said my name to her. A case of [mis]taken identity? My résumé was well received but my Black woman body was not. And then in 2012, when shopping for my wedding shoes in *Saks Fifth Avenue* in NYC I noticed how quickly all the white saleswomen's eyes dropped to study the patterned threads on the carpet. If I had the doubt to think I might have been imagining it, the sole Black male sales associate confirmed my suspicion and casually said loud enough for all of them to hear, "They're all going to pretend like they don't see you." Six

years later, I returned to the academy only to experience multiple micro-oppressions (Oilha-Donaldson, 2018) by a white scholar in my Department. Even while test driving a new car, the older, white woman, sales assistant at the dealership who noticed my keychain that had Trinidad inscribed on it believed it was okay to commend me for coming “so far” and doing “well for myself” because I mentioned to her I am a doctoral student. Finally, in 2019 when I was pulled over by the white police in Florida while on my way to school, I came face-to-face with disciplinary power and blinked away a glimpse of death. This is the kind of death that historically accompanies Black drivers who are confronted by the white police for traffic stops, sleeping in parking lots or walking home with a bag of Skittles that can be mistaken for a weapon (see Durham, 2015; Woodruffe, 2021).

When I came to the U.S., I didn’t know and certainly didn’t understand the precarity of Black women. Over time, and through much self-education, I came to learn about the plight of Black women in the U.S. Frankly, I still do not honestly think I had the capacity to truly understand their struggle as mine and vice versa. I didn’t locate myself as part of their narrative. I didn’t fully comprehend that it wasn’t *them* and *us*. It is just us. I need to acknowledge my own ignorance and bigotry and admit that it was easier to maintain the narrative of cultural difference by falling in-between a convenient chasm, a contingent contradiction, that allowed me to distance myself from the material realities of U.S. Black women ... until I came to be seen as one of them (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Diversi & Moreira, 2017). I have to own my role as a political bystander, as a person at times, too unwilling and too scared to participate in, and stand up for, Black women. I feel no pride in admitting this.

I am terrified at what my own inaction can mean for my future, the futures of other women like me, and for my son’s future. Perhaps my journey is as much about becoming a Black

woman as it is about becoming American. I am choosing to leave behind this role as bystander by using my research and teaching to step into new and courageous spaces to help other women. I refuse to contribute to the erasure of Black women's lived realities to include my own. Instead, I seek to discern what is happening around me, to me and examine what is required to change the world we live in. Let this be clear, I stand with and affirm *all* Black women. This is the only way forward.

I ask myself again: had I been so sheltered or was I already invested in my own ignorance? I wonder if my own "sense of reality" as Baldwin (1965) suggests, had been blurred? Had I somehow become a version of Baldwin's Gary Cooper?²¹ I have never been colorblind though I also couldn't recognize the structural impact of racism ingrained in this nation-state. Meanwhile my identity was implicated by the prominence of these structural inequalities and my cultural difference intensified fear in some people rendering me dangerous ("stranger danger") in some social locations.

Sarah Ahmed (2000) writes about the social constructions of "the stranger" and contends that "strangers are those that are already recognized through techniques between the familiar and the strange" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 37). Thus, to be the stranger is to be an outsider who grazes the peripheral of an imagined diasporic community (Anderson, 1983), placing that stranger's body as out of place (Ahmed, 2000). I knew I wasn't at home when I first arrived to the U.S., but I didn't have a clear understanding of how I was out of place. There were no clear borderlines.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) states that "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe to distinguish us from them" (p. 25). In this "vague" and "undetermined place," I

²¹ In his legendary debate against William H. Buckley in 1965, James Baldwin attacks the Euro-Western system of reality and states that "it comes as a great shock to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians—when you were rooting for Gary Cooper—that the Indians were you."

carry the “emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (p. 25). Perhaps one way to re-consider the depth and boundaries of my cultural identity in this place is to envision such boundaries in the way Dwight Conquergood (2002) suggests, as being “more like a membrane than a wall,” a barrier with selective permeability (p. 145). I am smart enough to know why these boundaries exist, but how do we become complicit in perpetuating separation and difference based on racialized class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality?

What had I walked into? The struggle to define myself among “them” was perplexing because I felt like I didn’t know the rules. “Them” became anyone I felt was a stranger and anyone who made me feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. This embodiment of disorientation was imposing, and, at times, my attention was directed toward nuanced notions of difference (Ahmed, 2006). I didn’t have the language to decipher what it means to be living in a body that is seen as fearful or feared. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed (2014) writes, “the other is only felt to be fearsome through a misreading, a misreading that is returned by the other through its response of fear” (p. 63). Thus, fear acts as an emotional construction of distance between me and them, to demarcate my life from theirs. My pride would not let me shrink in their presence, but I experience this form of “shrinkage” as a fundamental experience of being “othered” in social spaces (Ahmed, 2014, p. 64).

When people see me, what impression do I leave on them and what kinds of impressions do they want to imprint upon me? Forming impressions involves fusing perception, cognition, and emotion which results in an effect, a belief, an imitation, or a mark (Ahmed, 2014). The mark of fear not only *makes* an impression, rather it also *leaves* an impression upon me, and people who are like me. The affect of fear not only encloses me, it also travels within me silently, curiously across borders and boundaries, as a form of anticipating suffering (Ahmed, 2014).

Even in those passing moments relegated to darting glances and unwarranted suspicion, I feel the sting of being othered like a brand on my skin. This branding is likely invisible to you, but it is stamped all over my Black woman body. It is seared into my flesh. It is fundamental to my lived experience and, more generally, my existence. Inside I'm weeping but I couldn't fathom a way to laugh through the tears (Fanon, 1968). These castigations of affect are burned into my spirit too, and spirits remain invisible until they want to be seen.

Admittedly, I still feel as though I have been slow to coming to a critical Black consciousness. What did it mean to own being a Black woman in the U.S.? To identify myself as a Black woman is a radical act. Growing up in Trinidad I didn't have a keen sense of awareness of what it means to be a Black woman or have a raced identity at all. My own question disturbs me and during my earlier years in the U.S., I didn't like to be called a "Black woman" any more than I liked to be called an im/migrant in this country. Both of these terms carry their own specific and political burdens. Carol Boyce Davies (1984) stresses that we must be cautious with the terms we use to label or name ourselves (e.g., Black and African-American), because each term "represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation" (p. 5). According to Davies (1984), all terms are "subject to new analyses, new questions and new understandings" (p. 5). Much like im/migrants leave their homes and arrive in a new place, specific terms have particularities of arrival and departure. Thus, how we describe ourselves as in diaspora is subject to new interrogations of meaning (Davies, 1994).

To avow a Black identity would be to acknowledge all the histories and cultures of my African heritage as a Trinidadian. However, the term "Black" in the U.S. has become synonymous with a "Blackness" that is typically linked to racial difference and structural

inequality. White supremacy constructs a racial hierarchy in which blackness is marked as commodity, slavable, and racially inferior. Moreso, the perception of blackness becomes associated with a series of controlling images and stereotypes that deliberately arrests the dignity and womanhood of Black women (Collins, 1990; Davies, 1994). Durham et. al (2020) use the term “Black” to ask us to consider:

the possibility that blackness can flesh the felt-sense self as part of the marked cultural body, can story relational experiences that are inventive and transgressive in its work to democratize forms and humanize the other in cocreate encounters, and can serve as an ontology of resistance in which blackness is harnessed to understand the ubiquitous and generative nature of power—the power to shape identity and experience, and the power employed by the autoethnographer to author or rescript new ones. (p. 289)

Therefore, to be a Black, Trinidadian woman is to define myself within these naming processes. This means that I must acknowledge my difference and similarity with, and within, a global group of women, and to reclaim my power and creative intellectual freedom as a Black Trinidadian[-]American woman.

CHAPTER THREE: SHARING OUR STORIES

This chapter represents palpable conversations with five Black women who willingly and generously scheduled time to talk about their lives as it relates to issues of citizenship, home, and belonging in the U.S. These are conversations I needed to hear. I needed to know how other Black women who, like me, were born and raised in Trinidad and later migrated to the U.S., have come to understand their/our identities as Americans. While sharing our stories was both affirming and frustrating, they connected us as Black Trinidadian women in diaspora. I remain grateful to these women for trusting me with their stories and gifting me their time, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 health pandemic. There is much to learn about and from these stories.

The stories gathered here discuss growing up in Trinidad, leaving Trinidad, arriving, and living in the United States, with distinct articulations of identity negotiation, dislocation, understandings of citizenship and (un)belonging while longing for home. Telling the intimate details of their migration stories was difficult for some of these women. Some have experienced what I defined in Chapter Two as “ominous secrets,” in addition to feelings of separation, alienation while struggling to accomplish personal goals and create meaningful lives. The affective experience of migration is unevenly weighted since not all my participants entered the

U.S. in the same way. Those who entered as Permanent Residents had less complicated legal processes, but it didn't assuage a social or affective citizenship.

Although some of the women share similarities in their stories of political citizenship (e.g., acquiring citizenship), some of their experiences are radically different. In each story, I felt the profound complexity and contradictory emotions each of them feels in response to being Black women and citizens of both Trinidad and America. Undoubtedly each story is a reminder that storytelling plays an important role in the lives of Black women, and I am proud to have been able to carve a space for the following stories.

We Liming

I use "liming" in this chapter as a writing technique designed to create a familiar cultural space. As noted in Chapter 1, "liming" is a decolonizing storytelling methodology that creates an occasion in which the women *might* meet and the kinds of interactions that *could* result in their interaction. The words spoken by each participant come from the transcripts for each individual's conversation with me. Although they did not speak these words to each other (they spoke only to me via Zoom), I often imagine a space where we are speaking to and with each other. During this conversation, we participate in cultural communicative practices such as storytelling. The fictional lime that occurs below links all of the women with me, as the researcher. I perform the role of storyteller (the omniscient narrator) who also performs the role as the host of the lime. In those moments where I may choose not to interrupt the flow of the conversation, I use italics to signal moments of internal dialogue.

I began this dissertation with a short story situated at a virtual concert "We Home-Under one Roof" being performed by Trinidadian artiste Kes the Band. Many of my participants

acknowledge Christmas as a time when they most miss Trinidad. To honor this occasion, I am choosing to form a lime around our Christmas traditions. I begin this lime with parang music—Trinidadian folk music that is heavily inspired by Venezuela. Parang comes from the Spanish word “parranda,” which means a fête or party. As I previously mentioned, Christmas time is both spiritual and spirited as we celebrate the birth of Christ and the love of family and friends. For many Trinidadians, Christmas is all about food and festivity—sorrel, ginger beer, rum, pastelles, sweetbreads, and ham are just some of the prerequisite delicacies that are prepared each year in most homes. As a verb, ‘to parang’ is to go from house to house in celebration around Christmas time. At each home you visit, you are welcomed inside with offers of food, drink, music and what we call ‘ole talk’—the sharing of stories. Sometimes ‘paranging’ can be an all-night affair taking you back to your home long after the sun rises. The sounds of parang music are created usually by four to six singers, and skilled musicians who play the mandolin, the cuatro, the guitar, the box bass, the scratcher, and maracas. These are familiar sounds to all of us. They are sounds of home.

Robbie Styles²² introduces a parang segment in the “We Home- Under One Roof” concert. The stage setting resembles an old Victorian house brightly and freshly painted in red, complete with wooden shutters, a little porch, potted plants, a clothesline, and some chairs on the lawn. I imagine decorated red poinsettias carefully placed on the porch with hanging ferns just over the railings to catch the rain. Outside, I envision a spectacular hedge of flaming orange and red Ixoras twinkling with Christmas lights. There are six chairs, one chair for each of us. We sit in a circle where we begin our conversation.

²² To experience Robbie Styles’ parang music segment please visit: <https://youtu.be/zSheZxYq9cI>

The stories you will read in this chapter are based on transcripts of over 20 hours of interviews. I am the author/researcher presenting these women's stories and at times my authorial voice is explicitly included to provide clarifying ideas, such as transitions and, less often, grammatical consistency. I have included footnotes to explain dialects and specific cultural terms. While they stirred nostalgia, happiness and sadness in me, their stories also empowered me because now I know for certain that I am not alone. I introduce five incredible women: Nattie Girl, Winer Gyal #1, Bernadette, Symone and Ertha Violet.²³ These are their stories.

Pre-Migration: Life in Trinidad

Smiles. That's what greet me. Big, beautiful, broad Colgate-commercial smiles that are warm like a sea breeze. The genuine kind of culturally—and relationally—infused smiles that tell two Trinis that they are happy to see each other. The reassuring and knowing smiles that say, "I am glad to see you too." I wait for everyone to have some refreshments and find their space in the circle before I welcome them and thank them for dropping by. I watch how they interact and their ease of being with each other. Laughter, so much of it bellowing into the evening sky. We take turns answering questions about our families, careers, geographical locations. I receive some short-lived disapproving looks when I say I haven't been home since 2016, though they seem understanding. As they become seated, I join them. I explain my research, what I am trying to learn and why we are there. I give them all a chance to leave before I ask my first question. No one is remotely interested in leaving. These women came to talk. They want to be heard.

²³ These are not the real names of the participants. The names that are used in the stories have been chosen by each of the women to protect their identities and their privacy.

I watch the anticipation in their beautiful faces which remind me that life mysteries dwell behind those smiles. I want to know their stories but first I need to know more about them. I ask to no-one in particular, “what was your life like in Trinidad before you left?”

Nattie Girl speaks up first. She is a full-figured woman in her early 50s, whose eyes twinkle like sparkling bubbles in champagne. Her mocha skin is relaxed and displays happiness. Age has been kind to this woman. Her hair is wrapped in a turban which complements her long skirt. This lime was one of her first stops and she wanted to be sure, she got it in, as she says, “for the culture.”

“Growing up in Trinidad for me was typical,” Nattie Girl began. “I grew up in San Fernando. I had a two-parent home, siblings, lived in a good neighborhood. I went to Convent and in those days when I went to school, I could walk the streets with my friends easily. I went to church every Saturday. I understood the role of government and I knew I was a citizen. I felt I was a citizen of the country (although when I was younger, I couldn’t do much.) Migrating wasn’t my decision. I was 14. We came here without my father knowing. My mom is gangster. It wasn’t like, “Oh, we going to America.” It was “hey, let's go for a drive” and then we were dumbfounded wondering what we were doing at Piarco airport.²⁴ That’s the story. I’m not kidding you.”

Being such a planner myself, I couldn’t fathom the kind of undertaking that went into planning a migration with no forewarning to my family. Also, I especially don’t think that I would have embraced such a sudden separation so easily when I was 14 years old.

Winer Gyal #1 speaks next and begins by acknowledging the shrewdness of Nattie Girl’s mother, and then laughing a little she began speaking.

²⁴ Piarco International Airport is the main airport based in Trinidad. Tobago has the A.N.R. Robinson International airport, named for the country’s third President, Arthur Napoleon Raymond Robinson.

“I moved to the U.S. with a boy, a boyfriend. So, you can only imagine my parents, even though I was 21 or 22 at the time. In my household two things took precedence over all things: family and school. School was the most prioritized thing. Everybody in my family has at least one degree. And so, from birth, my now 100-year-old grandmother, who is the matriarch of our family instilled that we had to excel in our studies. My mom was a teacher, and she supported these ideas of excellence in education, but my grandmother is the one who really drove these ideas home.”

“Just like you,” Winer Gyal #1 turns to me and says, “My mom, my grandmother, my aunt went to R.C. school, and then to Convent. It was deemed a rite of passage. I was the firstborn, so I felt this pressure to set the example. In school I could never do enough, I never felt good enough. I always felt compelled to try to do better. For our CXC exams I got five ones and two 2s. My grandmother said, “yuh coulda gotten another one. What happen to that *other* one?” No recognition that I had in fact done quite well despite her wanting me to have had another “one.” *This stirred a bitter taste in my memory as I remember my own father’s reaction to my grade “B” in Economics. I was sympathetic to her position.*

“I remember crying when I had to report my results at my grandmother’s home, on her porch. Afterwards when she said that to me, I looked at my mother who knew I was angry like “Are you kidding me?” But I can’t actually say anything because I’d be missing teeth. My mom gave me that look that said to ‘zip it.’ Things like that really upset me a lot.”

Her voice trails off for a few seconds as though she were back on her grandmother’s porch thirty odd years ago. She continues, “The weight to be successful came from my grandmother. My mom was more careful, gentle even, pushing me but not as strongly. I didn’t

have one of those fun, squishy grandmothers that bake cookies. She was a no-nonsense woman who believed in getting the work done no matter what.”

As Winer Gyal#1 speaks with pride about her grandmother, my eyes catch the silver twists adorning Symone’s crown. Her short hair frames her smooth, mocha face that is accented by black, trendy eyeglasses. Symone who is in her mid-40s is listening intently. I can feel her wanting to join in the discussion. Something here, resonates deeply with her. I do not interrupt their flow.

“Well, as a former R.C. schoolgirl who was non-Catholic, my challenges were a little different,” Symone says matter-of-factly. “Growing up we had three main priorities: God first, family and then education. I can’t express how much that was drilled into our system. All I remember hearing my whole life was “if you get good grades, you can be whatever you want.” It wasn’t exactly true and proved to be a bit of a set up for me personally. It was a rude awakening even after completing school as I learned life was more than just good grades and schoolwork. And in our household, you had to learn music.” *I smile, allowing my mind to drift to my younger days of playing the piano and watching as my dad would play his guitar. This too, is familiar.*

Symone thinks carefully and says, “My mom saw the importance of not just focusing on education alone but having another outlet to build a skill. And I think my father's thought was, you can play the piano in church! God came first in our family. We were Pentecostals, although we went to a Catholic school. For this reason, I didn't connect with a lot of kids outside of school. On the weekend when kids would go to bazaars and other social events, I had choir practice and youth group. My life was very regimented. We did not grow up participating in Carnival. So, for Carnival when you guys were jumping up in the school courtyard, I was

shipped off to camp which I started at age nine.” *Church camp? I am amazed that Symone’s life at nine was so very different to mine.*

Before my mind wandered off, I asked her, “What made you decide to leave Trinidad?” She responds in the deliberate, mellifluous sound of our Trinidadian dialect.

“For a long time we had our own family business, and I ran it. There apparently was this unspoken assumption that I would have stayed at home to continue running the business. I mean, I felt like they *only* wanted me there to run the business. But I wanted something for *me*. I had gotten fed up living for everyone else. Sunday to Friday I was available to them. Saturday morning was mine. But I needed more, anything, something for just me. I didn’t want to go to UWI.²⁵ My sister was the first one to go away to study and she left when she was about 22. She was just one year younger than me when I left. Imagine, I’m starting university in the U.S. at age 23 where everybody is younger than me!”

Ertha Violet has a very gentle presence. She is near her mid-40s and wears a no fuss hairstyle that is natural and short. She seems immersed in her own reflections and is exceptionally quiet and even a little uncomfortable. I watch her softly clear her throat as she prepares to speak.

“I left Trinidad when I was 12 years old, when growing up for me was like a utopia. Everything just felt like what a perfect childhood should entail. My parents weren’t highly educated but they managed to secure good jobs. We lived in a newly built house in a nice neighborhood, where I had my own room, and friends with whom we’d play in the street. We enjoyed what would be considered a typical Caribbean upbringing. We also had access to things that lower class families didn’t have like *LA Gear* sneakers and brand-new clothing. My mom

²⁵ University of the West Indies.

was always dressing us up for church in clothes that she would get from America. We also enjoyed the ability to visit family overseas. Once my grandmother and aunt migrated to Miami, we'd visit Florida and visit places like *Disney World*. For my brother and I, we felt we had the best of both worlds. To me, it felt very much as though my childhood was just the absolute best. I too, attended an all-girls' Catholic primary school that was very diverse. For us, religion was definitely a priority, more so than having a relationship with God or with Christ. Education would be second. Third, was family. My mom has 12 siblings, and my dad has 15. Despite the fact that pretty much all of them had migrated before we did, having that relationship and connection to family was important.”

Ertha Violet pauses, as though summoning courage, before she continues speaking.

“My earliest memories of us leaving were filled with thoughts that said, “I didn’t pass for a good school so now we have to leave Trinidad.” Ertha Violet’s felt disappointment as a child showed on her face. She explains, “After I did the Common Entrance Exams, I didn’t pass for a top tier school or at least that’s what I was told. I was zoned and placed in a Junior Secondary School²⁶ which my parents would not have allowed me to attend. Later, after some investigation we discovered that I had in fact passed for Bishop’s Anstey High School but based on where we lived, I was zoned. It brought some comfort but for a long time, I still couldn’t shake the feeling that we left because I did poorly on my national exam.”

Ugh. The Common Entrance Exam (now called SEA) is such a life defining moment for Trinidadians. This educational milestone determined what Secondary school you would attend

²⁶ Secondary Schools can be seven years (top ranked), five years or three years (least desirable). Students who pass for Junior Secondary Schools have to test into a five-year school by the end of their third year to prepare for the CXC exams. Many of the Junior Secondary schools have a reputation for housing students who are unintelligent and prone to behavioral issues so that, some parents have their children repeat the Common Entrance exams to try to gain access to a seven year or five-year school. In 2008, Junior Secondary Schools transitioned to five-year educational institutions.

and was symbolic of your future career and potential. Families had a lot of investments in the outcome of this exam. Preparation for these exams is rigorous with most top performers taking extra lessons almost daily for the weeks leading up to the exams. Even writing this, my memory takes me back to those days of taking extra lessons with a retired teacher, an old man named Mr. Sandiford who I respected and learned to like after I was no longer a student in his lessons class. No one failed who went through his method—at least that’s what I was told. I found it impossible to think of failure in his presence because fear of failure was decidedly more terrifying. It didn’t help that once exam results were released, your success or failure was broadcast over a PA system for the entire school to hear. With a last name beginning with “W,” that was a lot of anxious, dreaded waiting.

“What about you Bernadette,” I ask, “What was your life like leading up to your migration?”

Bernadette, who is in her mid-50s wears a disorderly, fine haired afro that suits her petit frame. She smiles softly, and for just a second, I catch a shadow of sadness pass over her. I quickly make a note of it to remember to revisit it later on if time allows. Her voice is fine, but she speaks deliberately and carefully.

“When I finished Secondary school, I had this dire desire to continue my education. I just wanted to leave...to just explore. It didn’t happen right away though. My father was a strict educator whose influence imparted on me so after I graduated secondary school, I started working in accounting. Although I was already working in the field I was interested in, I still wanted to advance my education outside of Trinidad. I aggressively saved all my money and took it upon myself to apply to and get accepted to a university in New York. My dad supported me though the entire process. Thank goodness I had saved because I came out [of Trinidad] as a

foreign student. And you know, foreign students have to show they have sufficient money in their bank account.”

Ertha Violet and Nattie Girl are showing some signs of surprise at these disclosures. They did not have this experience.

“My life as a child was beautiful,” Bernadette says. I feel the elemental force of that memory taking up space among us. *I agree. Life in Trinidad was beautiful.* Bernadette tells us that she grew up in the western part of Trinidad with her dad, mom, grandmother, and siblings.

“My grandmother was the matriarch of the family, and very Christian. She belonged to the Seventh Day Adventist faith, and she molded us along those religious lines. I remember we had to be in bed by 6 pm on Friday to be up and ready for when she was ready for church, every Saturday.”

I see Ertha Violet and Symone nodding to acknowledge the similarities in their early upbringing and the impact of religious practices in their household.

“I have one sister, and many brothers...many because my father was sort of ...very... lady friendly. But he was into family. Although we were of different mothers, we lived together and maintained that unified, brotherly-sisterly kind of love that no one looks at each other as a half sibling. To this day, we are very closely knit even though we are split between countries.”

I think of the relationship between me and my brother who still lives in Trinidad. We are not as close as we once were—how could we be? He doesn't visit the U.S. so the only time I see him is via Whatsapp video or when I choose to go home. I have missed countless birthdays for my nephews and incalculable moments of simply being in their presence. My

brother doesn't get to take my son to the beach on weekends. My son doesn't get to play with his cousins. None of this can be fixed now. This is just the way it is.

Political Citizenship

Nattie Girl: Me? I love being a Trinidadian, a Trinbagonian. I remember coming to the U.S. and starting over, having to do *everything* here. I didn't have a choice because for years, we didn't go back. And then, once I went back, I've been back every year, multiple times a year. I love Trinidad and Tobago ... really love it. Not enough to live there—since most of my roots are here now in the U.S. My connection to home is a little bit more diluted now although my father still lives in Trinidad. I still have cousins and aunts there and we're still very engaged with each other to include friends in the neighborhood—everybody. I kept a lot of those foundational connections.”

Winer Gyal #1: “Ah mean, I have been a Trinidadian my whole life. I still am but I had no real sense of citizenship or being a citizen of a country until I moved to the U.S., I suppose. I think, for the most part, I just existed. Didn't we all? We didn't really know anything else outside of Trinidad. We were happy Trini's living in our little bubble. Only when I moved out of Trinidad and into United States, I became aware of my title, my presence here in this country. Living in Trinidad, I wasn't even aware that I am a Black woman. I was just about 21/22 when I left and just now becoming aware of who I was. In Trinidad, I was just ... me. I was my parent's daughter, somebody's grandchild living in my little bubble. Trinidad is a bubble. Even now, when I meet fellow Trinidadians and I'm talking with them, you realize that everyone's experience living in Trinidad is different on so many levels. It's only when you talk to other

people do you find out *exactly* how different these experiences are. I was very, very sheltered for a long time. And then when I moved to United States, I was still kind of sheltered.”

Symone: “My parents are both from Morvant ²⁷ in Trinidad which scared a lot of people. Some of my fondest memories involve traveling abroad with my family. I didn’t see the privilege that came with international travel until other kids brought it to my attention that we were well off because we go ‘on vacation.’ That passport was such a rite of passage since it provided access to other places. Naturally growing up having one, it felt normal in my possession. For a long time, I couldn’t (and sometimes still can’t understand) how some people don’t have one. To each his own, I guess.”

Nattie Girl: “You reminding me of this Black American woman I know— she’s about 65 or something. And she does not have a passport. And for the last six years I’ve been encouraging her, saying to her, “You should go get a passport, fly anywhere...fly to Jersey.” But she’s not interested in going anywhere. They will go on a bus trip somewhere instead. Me? I need my passport. That’s how I go home.”

Symone: “Ent?²⁸ I distinctly remember my second semester in college when I lived on campus, one of my roommates was busy looking through a little album I brought with me from home, and she turned to a photo of the Eiffel tower. She asked me where I went to take that picture. Her tone was suggesting it was a studio photo with a backdrop. When I told her I visited the Eiffel Tower in Paris she seemed dubious and skeptical. I suppose she was under the impression that the first time I ever traveled was when I came to college. The arrogance!”

²⁷ Morvant is a working-class village located within close proximity of the nation’s capital, Port-of-Spain. Over time this community has become known for housing a lower-class population with high levels of crime.

²⁸ A Trinidadian colloquialism that means “you know?” or “that’s right.”

Ertha Violet: “I learned civic responsibility from my father. My mom was more about religion and less about any kind of civics. My dad, however, before becoming a fire officer, worked in the labor unions and the labor congress. He had done some work with one of our former Prime Ministers very briefly and gradually developed a very Pan Africanist identity. He was very much into the Black Power movement. My father was a proud PNM supporter, balisier²⁹ and all! For him, PNM is the power party and he felt strongly that this is the movement for us by us, and this is how we ought to be as civic minded people. My dad also felt we needed to be aware of what is happening abroad since nothing happens in isolation. He recognized early on that African struggles are not just localized, and that there is a global connection through the struggles that Black people face throughout the diaspora.”

Bernadette: “I can relate. Funny thing though, looking back, it is clear that for the most part, we were Trini’s living in Trinidad. I don’t know that I now know what it means to be an American any more than I understood what it meant to be a Trinidadian citizen at one point. My family never talked about rights or the need to uphold rights or the need to assert identity through civic processes. Citizenship, for the most part, while growing up in Trinidad, to me was a very underplayed conversation. I think even now— you don’t really hear people talking about how strongly they feel about being a Trinidadian citizen. And when you do, you tend to hear it more from the people who have left. Once you’re there, you don’t really do anything...you just live. My folks were very PNM—that was their party, and they didn’t want to hear anything else! But I can’t remember being taught that sense of who we are as a people and being a Trinidadian. There was never any real sense that civics is part of our responsibility. Isn’t that strange? Education was very much enforced. After that, you work and you get married, you

²⁹ The balisier is the political Party flower for the People’s National Movement (PNM).

have kids, and pretty much that's it. And if you look at most of the people in Trinidad, that's how they live their lives. We were encouraged to develop these other aspects of our lives but the very core of who we are as citizens was largely ignored.”

I let this beginning conversation about identity and citizenship marinate a little. I didn't quite know how to respond so I just listened. I decided to share my truth that I have never voted in Trinidad, since I left in non-voting year. In fact, the first time I ever voted in my life was as an American citizen. My parents didn't discuss politics and voting in our house although I knew they did not support the same political parties. Perhaps this might explain my own initial reluctance to address political issues while living in the U.S. I never needed to discuss politics in Trinidad but as a Black woman, in America. you become wedged in the politics whether or not you want to participate.

Some of the women are heading over to the bar table and refreshing their drinks. I'm trying to decide if I should walk over and ask Bernadette privately why she seemed sad when I asked about her reasons for leaving. I decide against it although, I will admit, I want to know what story lay behind that moment. To keep the conversation going and to get a better sense of how these five women understood their migration experience, I direct the conversation to articulations of Departures (from Trinidad) and Arrivals (to the U.S).

On Departures

Bernadette: “I remember my departure from Trinidad. It was miserable. I was the first and it was my first time ever leaving home. The day before we were all in tears, crying

because I am the eldest of the of the group—first child, first grandchild, leaving. The day I left, my sister and my dad took me to the airport. I was about 21 years old. Do you remember those waving galleries at Piarco airport? That place tore peoples hearts out to stand in that gallery and watch their family and friends leave. It was hard enough to leave my family but when I had to take that walk across the tarmac to the plane? Ugh. It felt like the walk of death, watching them watch me leave. I kept turning back to look as I walked away, and each step toward the plane was one step further away from them. I was a walking trail of tears. I cried all the way to my seat and on the plane until eventually I fell asleep. When I awoke, I remember when the captain announced that we are approaching landing in JFK. I looked through the window and I saw... like a field of light...like a bed, a blanket of light. And I thought to myself “Wow.” It was so different than landing in Trinidad when through the window you’d see all the green, the water, the homes that looked miniature from the sky but weren’t compact. Coming to the States and looking out that window it was nothing but bright lights. I whispered out loud, “Oh my God. I made it. I’m here.” I always remember that departure. It was heartbreaking for me to leave my folks even though I was pursuing a dream.”

Winer Gyal #1: “I moved to the U.S. in 1990. My move was very much a "non-traditional migration" thing, if you know what I mean. I moved in with this family who were Trinidadian. They had a home in Brooklyn, and a restaurant business. I moved to United States with the intent of continuing with school...You know, sometimes you are trying to make a way and you can’t really figure out what you are meant to do. So, when opportunity presented itself, I said, ‘Yes. I’m gonna do it.’ My parents didn’t like it although my mom was supportive. My dad said things like “where you goin’ behind this boy? blah, blah, blah, you’re not gonna succeed,

you're gonna fail. Why don't you just stay here? blah blah blah." It was now or never for me, so I rebelled and just went."

Ertha Violet: "I thought we were leaving because I did poorly on my exams. We sold most things, gave away a lot of things but we kept the house. We left under the premise that we're moving to Miami to live with my grandma for a while and she would take care of everything for us there. There were so many goodbyes to friends, neighbors and I was leaving, thinking that I failed my parents not knowing then that the system failed me. This kind of thinking became my motivation when I moved to the U.S. because now, I thought —okay, I'll show them. I'll become an American girl. My plan involved making lots of new friends and adapting to American life and culture as soon as possible."

Symone: "I remember my dad was trying so hard to be Mr. Tough guy, Mr. Macho. I said, "Daddy, you're not going to hug me?" He simply responded saying, "yuh want to be late? Just focus, okay?" Much later on I discovered that he felt as though I ran away from home. My leaving was especially tough on my younger sister with whom I was very close. She became very withdrawn and wouldn't speak to anyone. Later she told me that she felt abandoned because I was like a mother to her, but I didn't realize how much my leaving would have affected her. It was also super tough on my dad though he never quite let on. Even after I was living abroad, I would call home and daddy would be very stern, unemotional even. He would ask, "what you have to tell me? Be blessed. Focus." That was it, very businesslike. The first time he told me he loved me I got confused and hung up the phone!"

U.S. Arrivals and Culture Shock

“I attended university on scholarship. I arrived in Miami, in January to start in the Spring semester. I had with me *all* of my worldly possessions.” Symone giggles as her eyes widen with cheeky amusement as she says this to mark the incredulity of trying to pack your entire life into two suitcases. If ever there was a way to pack your life in a suitcase, this is what a failed attempt might have looked like.

“I remember waiting in Miami airport for my cousin (who used to take care of us as kids), but I had not seen her in a long time. I was dressed for cold weather in a warm sweater and heavy boots because ‘they’ said it was wintertime. I got there and the sun was blazing hot! And I am there, standing outside in these hot clothes waiting and waiting and my cousin kept driving round and round the airport like she not sure what I look like. I don’t know who she was looking for! Look for somebody who looks like you, jus’ darker. With all my things—how could she not see me?”

We all laugh at the silliness of the moment, but it is a familiar kind of silliness. Before cell phones existed, there was no fast or easy way to call someone. So, you just stood in place and waited until they saw you or you saw them and waved them down.

Symone continues telling her memory of this event.

“I do remember wondering how I must have been looking to other people. I stood there in that hot sun with my two bags and listen— I used *all* of my 70 pounds of luggage. I made close to 500 pastelles that Christmas to bring with me because I was determined to have pastelles all year. I gave them out as gifts although I made sure I kept mine to take me through the whole year. And what did I do? I forgot the pastelles! Steups. Such is life, eh? First day in Miami was

blazing sun. The next day was freezing cold. All that temperature change is very much like my relationship with America.”

“Hmm...” begins Bernadette, “although I had gotten accepted to University, I needed to live somewhere. I ended up staying with one of my dad’s friends who had two daughters. They lived in an apartment building that was just a scary sight at first. I remember her picking me up. And when she took me *there* I started questioning myself: Did I make the right decision? What is *this*?”

Bernadette continues to describe her first impressions.

“It was a little terrifying, in part, because it was new and unfamiliar and dark, and somewhat menacing. We got into a compound with about eight to 10 different high-rise buildings. It was the projects in Brooklyn. Projects! I grew up in a house, I grew up in a home. Where I lived, people owned homes, houses. I knew nothing about apartments and apartment buildings and least of all, the projects. It was proper culture shock. It reminded me that I was not home anymore. I remember walking down a long, empty dirty hallway leading to a two-bedroom apartment. The mom was in one, and her two girls and myself would be in the other. Sharing a room with strangers? Growing up we had our own bedrooms. The boys had theirs and my sister and I shared a room, but it was ours. I suppose, these two girls who were sisters were also sharing a room, like I did with my sister, but I did not know *them*. I was the outsider. It felt strange, very awkward, uncomfortable even.”

“I donno...” Bernadette begins, “coming into this cramped space, and this woman and her two kids living there....” I can see her embodied discomfort and frustration as though she is once again entering that space.

“I kept asking myself: how am I meant to survive here? What do I do in this less-than-ideal situation? What do I *tell myself to do*? I already said my goodbyes and I’ve given up everything I know to pursue this degree. Every day I reminded myself I came to get an education and then I am going back to Trinidad. This is the dream. This is what I am going to do.”

“I feel yuh” says Nattie Girl. “Moving to the U.S. imprinted upon me.... I can’t say in the most ‘positive’ way initially because there was some culture shock. When we moved to the U.S., we lived in the Bronx, and we had to share our three-bedroom apartment with my auntie and her children. We lived in our own house in Trinidad, a very, very big house. We all had our own rooms, and we enjoyed our comforts, and space. Here, we slept on the floor. Not to mention, the added background noise of the train that went right by our apartment all hours of the night. That noise alone was a constant reminder of where I was and was not. And I was not in Trinidad!”

“I moved with my parents,” says Ertha Violet. “So I trusted them, and I was on a mission to prove to myself and others— I don’t know who really— that I wasn’t a poor student. In middle school I started mingling with other children. My thick accent, to them sounded “funny” and they would know right away, I was a foreigner, not ‘American.’ I was lumped in with all the other Black kids to include Black American kids. Although at the time I would have been a Permanent Resident, so I was not quite ‘American.’ I think the shift in my thinking only really started happening once we came to the United States where my accent made me ‘different.’ By the time I did high school in Miami, I found myself developing friendships with Caribbean-American people—Haitians, Dominicans, Cubans. It was pretty diverse, and I found there to be so many similarities with our food, our culture, our music. In these circles, I felt a sense of being

home away from home.” *Ertha Violet reminds me how much we desire cultural citizenship no matter where we go.*

There is a short, reflective conversational silence and I can see the ladies absorbing the music, and the feeling of being with one’s tribe was evident. I am tempted in this moment to lean into the topic of home, but I do not yet feel as though I have heard enough about their lived experience to compare their lives in both countries. I decide to capitalize on Ertha Violet’s comment related to assimilation, about being “lumped in” with the other Black kids to find out how these women felt about their Black identity. I turn to the women and ask the question to Ertha Violet since she was the last speaker, “When did you begin to think of yourself as a Black woman?”

Complexities of Black Identity Performances

“I didn’t even think of myself as a Black girl in Trinidad—in fact, this particular identification only occurred when I moved to the U.S.,” says Ertha Violet. “But thinking back, I remember seeing kids in their red and white uniforms who attended the private school up the street. I would notice that they were normally East Indian, fair skinned, French Creole or Syrian. Even though I recognized these differences, I didn’t think that I am Black, and they are not mostly because my entire family is very diverse. My mom’s sisters and brothers don’t look like each other. They have different hair textures, skin colors, eye colors. Because of this diverse ethnic dynamic within my family, I never really thought of myself as a Black girl. I just thought of myself as Trinidadian, a Trinbagonian. At least, until we moved to the States.”

“I got my Master’s Degree in African New World Studies that was then headed by Dr. Carole Boyce Davies. This brilliant, powerful Trinidadian woman opened my eyes, my mind, my spirit to so many of the values my dad tried to instill in me from young. Through Dr. Davies I became connected to other powerful black women like Dr. Keyshia Abraham and Dr. Meredith Gatsby. Through them, I started re-thinking my entire self, my identity. These women inspired and empowered me. These women helped me to feel comfortable decentering whiteness in my daily life. These women challenged me and noticed me, *me*. It was such a defining moment.”

Ertha Violet takes a second to reconnect her thoughts and her tone becomes somewhat, conciliatory.

“I think I am strong in my identity but sometimes I feel as though I am guilty of trying to make myself too palpable to be accepted in certain spaces. I’m 44 years old and still very much a work in progress.”

Her voice trails off and I can see her negotiating if she wants to disclose the next aspect of her life. She takes a short, calming breath before she unburdens.

“Another layer of racist nonsense I have to deal with relates to my daughter,” Ertha Violet discloses. “I’ve actually had people ask me, “where was *she* born?” My daughter is very fair skinned. My husband’s last name is clearly Asian—Chinese to be exact—although he’s Trinidadian. To these white people, I am some Black woman with a hyphenated Chinese name, with a very fair skinned child who has a completely different hair texture and complexion to mine. I’ve been called the nanny despite what I think are obvious resemblances to my youngest daughter. These people create unsubstantiated assumptions that my child is not mine which is something that irks my spirit often.” *I empathize with the kind of rage Ertha Violet might have*

experienced. To have your umbilical connection publicly discarded by strangers is disrespectful.
I admire her restraint.

Bernadette is gazing at her phone where she is admiring a photo of her father which is her wallpaper.

“So much of the shaping of my identity came from my dad,” she offers softly, as though just saying his name is breaking her heart. I can almost imagine her giving him a soft kiss on his cheek before she puts the phone away. Talking about her dad seems painful.

“When I was 16 or maybe going on 17, I was into makeup and dad wasn’t having it. He said, “You’re a beautiful Black woman. You don’t need that on your face. Go take that off.”

“Fly shit,” I blurted and laughed as I said it. “My dad used to call makeup fly shit. He was not a fan.”

Bernadette and the other ladies started laughing.

“We had only Black dolls, no white dolls—and we got those Black dolls later on in life. And hair?” She rolls her eyes, “He would say ‘don’t perm! You have beautiful hair!’ He didn’t like it when we started perming. But that was the standard, the measurement of beauty back then: long straight hair. In our teenage years, my sister and I would notice the boys looking more at the lighter skin girls and the girls with the long flowy hair. My sister and I wondered if that’s why we were not looked at as much. And as a Black woman you start to question: am I enough? Am I doing enough? If I got my education, maybe I’ll be seen more, maybe I’ll be liked more. You know, my father cut my hair off because I went one day and decided to get a press, with a hot comb. He saw it and said to me sternly, “if you cannot manage it, then cut it off!” And he cut it off! My passport picture shows the end result of that radical haircut. He was just not having that straight hair business. You have what’s yours, learn to identify with that. Take it or leave it.”

Bernadette still found a silver lining in the vanity malady.

“What he did—it was good in other ways, I guess. Because when I came here to the U.S., I had that strong sense of who I am, and no one could shake that. I am who I am. Take it or leave it.”

“What about you, Symone?” I asked, “When did you begin to think about yourself as a Black woman?”

Symone was ready for this conversation.

“Miami was the first eye opener. After just two semesters, I moved off campus because I too old and I just couldn't do the campus thing any longer. I ended up moving into a house which I rented with a couple of other Trinidadian friends in a predominantly Hispanic community in Hialeah. My other two roommates were ‘high-colored,’ and I was the only brown girl, okay? My neighbors would not even speak to me, okay? They wouldn't even say, “Hey neighbor, good morning.” Nothing. They would speak to my roommates, however. I had one roommate who looked Spanish and the other one was *Cocoa Paynol*— French Creole with freckles and that kind of thing. My boyfriend at that time was also a little lighter skinned with nice hair. They spoke to him as well although *he* didn't live there. They were not very friendly, and I quickly became very disillusioned with Miami.”

Symone sounded a little disgusted as she retold this memory. She tried to tell the story as though she had moved past it. However, I could tell by her facial expressions, that she was disappointed at having to confront the harshness of overt discrimination. As she speaks, I note how colorism is a marker of identity that is connected to white-centered beauty. I don't want to disturb Symone's memory work, so I remain quietly listening and allow her to continue speaking about her experience.

“Living here in this country just...different” Symone blurts. “In Primary school we had a mix of everything, right? We were used to seeing and relating with a mix of people—Indians, Chinese, Trinidad whites, douglas³⁰—so I appreciated our ethnic diversity. I understood religion because our principal would bring it up often because I was *not* Catholic. I, however, had no concept of race. I didn’t have a concept of being a Black woman. Even to this day whenever I talk about people from home, I see them—us— as Trinidadians.”

Nattie Girl is swaying to a soca beat and once she catches the rhythm, she speaks to us.

“I feel yuh on that one” she muses. “Although I think being a Black woman in this country, you kind of get grouped into a system or a narrative or, a way of life. If all you did was see me as a Black woman—if I don't open my mouth, no one would hear that I have an accent or you wouldn't know that I am not a born American. Although we are all Black women, once I speak and you hear my accent, that's a whole different genre of functioning. Regardless of the situation, I know I will do what I have to do to get by ...to get across... to get on. Some of these people here think we live in huts and swing from vines. Yuh have to wonder where they got this information from—?”

“Listen to meh...” Winer Gyal #1 jumps in. “Let’s face it, to the outside world, we are all Black American. The box they give us to check says “Black or African American.” I am Black but not African American. There is no Caribbean-American. So now you are forced into a classification system you don’t identify with. Sometimes I just say “other” because none of it really fits me. And there are stark differences. I don't know *why* they are, but they exist. I do feel like being from America, being born and bred here, their experience is very different to how we grew up. But you have to understand also that we grew up in a micro bubble in Trinidad. So, for

³⁰ Dougla is a term used in Trinidad to describe a person of mixed ethnicity who is both Black (of African descent) and East Indian.

us, our experience going to prestigious Catholic schools was different from somebody from Lavantille³¹ and living on the hill. You know what I mean? I am a Black Trinidadian, yes, of course. But to say all of us who are Black Trinidadian's had the same experience, the answer is no. Not at all!"

"And to America, we are not Trini's," Bernadette interjects. "We are just Black people who they just blended in and gave us a box to check—Black or African American. We didn't know the disparity of the racism that is buried, ingrained, in the fabric of this country. We didn't know. We also stood out because we came here so unaware. For all intents and purposes, we came here on a mission and that's what our focus was on. We came here to get our education. And that was it. Except as time went on, that wasn't *just* it. There are so many things I didn't know and still don't know. And we as West Indians coming in, we pick up the narrative that Black Americans are no good, lazy, this and that. And where did *that* come from? A lot of the times, even when people know you're Black and they hear you talk, they tend to associate you with Black Americans. And you know we protest, 'no no no no. I am not a Black American. I am from Trinidad.' Right away you want to identify where you're from and you distance yourself from them.

I could not disagree with Bernadette. I too had heard the 'stories' and disparaging comments about Black Americans, to include African Americans. *How is it that these defamatory narratives traveled so far?* The troubling part about this revelation is not so much that we were aware about how the cultural narratives travel, but how easily we assigned credibility to these unsubstantiated narratives.

Bernadette interrupts my roaming thoughts.

³¹ Lavantille is a city in the nation's capital that is often associated with the lower classes and poverty. It has been labeled one of Trinidad's premier crime ridden areas.

“Black people in this country have gone through so much and have been so oppressed. It’s the system— the things that were put in place to keep them from a level of growth. It just went from one generation to the next. So many white Americans tend to align all Black people with that class of people who are not the ones that have progressed and who are doing good things with their lives. It’s as though to highlight the positive would mean they cannot maintain the negative narrative they have been reproducing for so long. I too, am Trinidadian first and always no matter where I go. I don’t even have to say it. I just need to open my mouth and it’s there. I can’t teach my children how to be American because...what is Americanness? I can only teach and give what I know.”

“Is true...” says Winer Gyal #1, “being a Black woman in this country means something very different than where we grew up. I think that anyone who is Black and migrated from another country, comes with a different viewpoint that is invaluable. You understand what you’re going to do, you’re going to push and you’re going to succeed. I guess it’s a good thing even if it doesn’t always feel good while doing it. Looking back, I realize that I was still living in my little Trinidadian bubble after I became a citizen. There’s so much history I knew nothing about. Why didn’t I know about Black Wall Street? Clearly, I’m still a Trinidadian living in America. I am not and I don’t identify as Black American. I did not have the same experience that Black Americans have had, and I don’t purport to. I appreciate and I’m completely on board with the Black struggle, because in everybody else’s eyes, *all I am* is Black. They doh really care. When I’m at work, they look at me up and down. And then they go, “Oh, I get an accent. Where are you from?” Cuz, you know, I still haven’t lost my accent. And I never will. But then I have to explain. And I *hate* that. I resent having to explain that I wasn’t born here but I’ve lived here for a long time. In New York, I didn’t have to do that. I feel like living in Texas that happens on a

daily basis. And so that brings a whole other level of stress. I feel like I'm always under a microscope because I'm a foreigner to them. As a Black woman, I am fed up. I don't really mingle a lot. I have a small group of friends—some of whom are white. But I doh care what you look like, is yuh vibe, yuh know? I do feel that day to day, I have to explain myself more both to Black Americans and to white Americans and I really resent it.”

“—I will say” intervenes Nattie Girl, “that I also didn't know the history of Blacks in America to truly understand so many of the underlying issues, least of all to have a conversation about it. And so, in this Black skin, we kind of landed in the tension.”

“I am so grateful for my history teacher in Secondary school who, I felt, prepared me for being in America,” states Symone. “We were taught American history in depth to include slavery. We got the real history, not the whitewashed version. And yet, although I had an understanding of American history, I didn't have an understanding of the African American experience. Very little of our education addressed how they feel or have felt over time. But living here, I had a rude awakening. I am forced to confront being a Black woman in the U.S. whenever I have to fill out a form that demands I choose, “Black or African American.” This always offends me, and I choose the box that says “Other.” I'm not white or Mexican, or Hispanic. I'm not Native American nor am I a Pacific Islander. No disrespect to African Americans. I am Black, I am Trinidadian. Where's my box? Nowhere. There's no option for where I am from so, I have no choice right? If I don't belong in any of the boxes you give me, I am other. That's the space they offer me on the form. Other. But listen to me well— understand who we are in this country as Black people.”

My ears perked up noting the unmistakable preacher tone in Symone's voice. She was commanding listening space now.

“If someone sees me in the street, they don’t know I am a Trinidadian. I don’t have it tattooed to my face so they can recognize where I’m from. All they gonna see is this Black skin and that is all they will care about. I tell you, when I moved to Hialeah, all they saw is a Black woman living in their neighborhood. They can’t see that my great grandmother was Venezuelan. All they look at is my Black skin. You have to be *very* careful here.”

Symone’s cautionary words sound ominous to me. It sounds like there is more she wants to tell but perhaps those old wounds were not fully healed. I don’t want to trigger any bad feelings.

Bernadette cuts in. “Admittedly,” she says, “I’m not much better. I had no knowledge of the history of race and racism in America prior to moving here. None. I thought I was moving to a beautiful place because back home you see America portrayed on the TV. And, you know, I think I was coming to this grand, special, place ...this country where everyone can come and live. And as they say, “live the American Dream.” Race and racism were never part of my thoughts when I first got here. We never discussed—at least I have no memory of studying slavery in school in Trinidad. We read a lot of classic literature, very few by Black people. Coming to America, the plan was to learn, to discover more. We had no idea what more was!”

Race and racism are more closely connected to class implications than we might care to admit. As a postcolonial nation, colorism and racial stratification exist in our culture and rituals many of which were inherited from the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French and the British during the slave trade. The existence of socioeconomic class structures already implies that we had become used to discrimination and inequality marked by class.

Identity Negotiation in Workspaces

“Based on where I work—that’s when I knew for sure Black Americans really had a chip on their shoulder about Caribbean women,” says Nattie Girl. “In their minds, when you comin’ from the Caribbean it means you already fall and you coming from poverty. As a social worker coming to do my evaluations [they would say]: “how you could come here and to tell me what to do?” Acting like I couldn’t and didn’t know anything and I wasn’t qualified to do my job. Why you mad at me? I didn’t come here and put you in the projects? I didn’t do that to you. That’s not my fault! And then there’s “why did you come here and take our work, our job?” Or ‘take’ whatever, whatever they possess, they feel that we are somehow dispossessing them. But like I said, I didn’t know their history in this country.”

Winer Gyal #1 adds to the conversation.

“As a physical therapist there is not huge representation in my field. It’s predominantly white females, and I’m the only Black therapist in my entire department! So now I have these patients looking at me and *now* questioning me, questioning my credentials. And then I have to explain myself—again. It’s always the same litany of interrogation: “You have an accent, where are you from? Where’s your family?” What does it matter? This is the kind of stress I have to navigate on a daily basis. It’s too much sometimes.”

I watch Ertha Violet as she releases a long sigh.

“At work,” Ertha Violet says, “I try not to code switch. I am proud of the way I speak—after all, it is English. However, there are times when I have been made to feel very uncomfortable by both Black and white Americans so I would code switch to fit in, I guess. After Trump won, I definitely felt like I had to defend my Americanness more and incidentally found myself code switching a lot to sound more American. It became exhausting. I would try to

speak the way they speak to be accepted, included, understood, and respected. I think it's unfair but that's just the way it is. Sometimes in my workspaces I find myself questioning my purpose and I turn to God. I lean into my spirituality to help me not become like them—full of hate and intolerant of difference. Truth be told, this is just the way I have had to navigate some of those spaces.”

Bernadette affirms this statement and elaborates.

“One of my first classes at university was Speech. I wrote and presented a speech on steelpan in Trinidad. At that time my accent was very strong, and everyone noticed. It really hit me then that I'm in a strange environment because in Trinidad, we all sound alike. And nobody, nobody challenges the way you sound. My dad was always on top of us to speak properly but your accent was never challenged. When I did my speech in that class, the students laughed at me. And with the humiliation came all the questions like “where are you from?” I'll tell you, that was the first time that I truly felt it when I asked myself, "What am I doing here? Why did I leave?" I absolutely questioned my purpose here. I didn't feel that my blackness was challenged in any way as much as my difference was not accepted in that moment when I got up on that podium to deliver my paper on steelpan. That moment stuck with me for a long time. To think that this country is made up of so many immigrants from different countries with different accents and languages... You can reject my accent as much as you want but my blackness?”

Bernadette smiles with her eyes and her lips and says, “I'm proud of my blackness. No one will use my blackness against me to prevent me from doing anything. Nothing.”

“Watch nah, from the time I open my mouth, my Trinidadianess flies out, accent and all” Symone blurts in the rapid staccato of our dialect. “Doh get me wrong, after working on the phone remotely for so long, I've learned to code switch because not everyone is ‘tolerant.’ I tend

to switch up my word use if I'm speaking to someone from the Caribbean or someone who sounds more American. I've had people say, "Oh I love your accent, where are you from?" Sometimes I say, "I'm from here." I've had others who will ask to speak to an "American" and I insist, "I am American," because I am. Then they will ask rudely, "so where did you get that accent?" Sometimes I flip the conversation by saying, "I hear an accent as well. Where are you from?" Give me a break!" Symone rolls her eyes to punctuate the incredulity of other people challenging her Americanness because of her accent before she continues.

"There are so many regionalisms and dialects in the United States alone. Sometimes dealing with some of these ridiculous people can make you want to sin your soul! I ended up working for a credit card company where I was the only Black person on an all-white team. I would bump heads with my supervisor—a white woman—all the time. Bear in mind that this was during the Trump years so you can imagine how this story ended. Long story short, after a lot of deliberate aggravating incidents on her part it was decided after four years that I was no longer a 'good fit' for the company. All the time I am here in this country, after all this stuff keeps happening, I do find myself wondering about where I fit, you know?"

On Foreign Accents

The ladies are chatting freely in their Trinidadian accents and mine is noticeably diluted at this point. I explain to them, that I grew tired of people asking me to repeat things as though I was speaking a foreign language. After I graduated college, I was subsumed by whiteness in corporate America and I couldn't find a space for my accent in the workplace. *I wonder if it was easier to disguise my accent to be more accepted by my co-workers?* Even when I would meet up

with my Trini friends it would take some time before I found my native accent in our conversational flow.

Nattie Girl proudly expresses, “My Trini accent is still noticeable, and some people like to pretend they don’t understand me when I speak. I have to switch up when I am at work because they would not understand. And there were other things I sensed, I felt, you know? The glares and the stares “How come this girl come here and be better than me?” Meanwhile, all we doin’ is mindin’ our business, doing the best job we can.”

Ertha Violet quickly quips. “What is their obsession with my accent? You can drive all the way up from South Florida to Boston and you’ll hear different accents. Why aren’t those accents ‘funny’ sounding? I guess their funny sounds are familiar. Even for those who speak another language like Spanish or Creole, it is a marker of their intelligence not a defect. And yet there’s this feeling of ostracizing or blocking people of color from being seen and heard by white people. I’ve tried to express this idea to my white counterparts, particularly white women with whom I’ve worked all to no avail. You cannot simply assume that someone is not as smart as you are simply because they’re struggling to enunciate in the same manner as you. It is incredibly frustrating! Those nuances with other Black women, those marked differences of feeling odd or sticking out like a square peg in a round hole became more prominent in Washington D.C., in Maryland, a little bit in Boston. I would see people who looked like me, their skin tone was like mine, but my marker of difference was my accent. I would sound somewhat American, but my Trini would come out in conversation at which time I would be bombarded with bold and irritating questions like “where are you from?” If I said “Miami,” some would even persist to ask “Where are you really from? I hear an accent.” I got a lot of that from my Black brothers and sisters and although our histories are similar, there are these notable

differences. I think they decide that we as Caribbean people are just different to Black Americans because our cultures are different, the food is different. Instead of accepting our similarities it seems like there is more effort put into perpetuating these differences.”

Defining Home

Nattie Girl is eager to voice how she thinks and feels about home.

“Home for me is always Trinidad. My father is there. My block is there. And some of the people that lived there when I was there are still there. When I go home it’s a bit of a homecoming. I fall right back into the same “Oh, hey, what’s going on?” Go by yuh house, eat yuh food, buss a lime. You know, there’s just that feeling of when you were younger. It’s still the same. And even though Trinidad is home, after being there for a while I do feel like it’s time to return to the U.S. I mean, Trinidad is *home*, but New York is the home I’ve become accustomed to. I think like that because Trinidad is where we were born.”

I could see Winer Gyal #1’s longing for home displayed on her face. She closes her eyes for a few seconds as though imagining she is already in that home space before she speaks.

“Home for me would be how I grew up. I just feel that it is an unattainable goal more so because my sisters are all over the world. My home is my family. I think because we are not all in one place it’s hard to really categorize home. My nuclear family now—my kids myself, my husband— that’s my quasi home. In my utopia, home is how I grew up and I don’t think it’ll ever be here... About three years ago we took a trip to Florida. Everyone met up there—my aunt, my mother, sister and her kids from Trinidad and my other sister from London. We met up in West Palm Beach and went to Disney. We spent a whole week there in Florida and it was the best experience ever. It was family and all our kids were together. I loved seeing their kids with my

kids. That was amazing. This is what I just yearn for...Some days I don't know where home is anymore. I really don't know. I want to say home is Trinidad, like when I am talking to other Trini's or a patient. When I say home I mean Trini, but is it truly my home? No. Is Texas my home? No. I don't feel it. I live here. We have a house here. Every time I suggest to my husband that we should move back to New York he says he doesn't want to leave his backyard! The reference point has changed but it's not really my home."

Ertha Violet's gentle presence magnifies with her eyes as the other women talk about home.

"Sometimes my spirit just takes me home, to Trinidad" Ertha says as though in a daydream. "We were living real good in Trinidad with my husband, our kids, his family. I thought I was living the life that I had begun when I was a kid. We moved to the U.S. as a family, but we always had Trinidad at the back of our minds. We always thought if it doesn't work out in the U.S, we could always go back home. Home is where the heart is but where is the heart? The heart is for food (last night we had curry), the heart is for walking into a space and saying, "good morning." Having manners... people here don't do that; they tend to look at you funny. We have a beautiful house, we have a lovely car, we live in a wonderful community, very quiet. But why wouldn't it *feel* like home? It's because of those things that we have known — religion, family, education— are not the same. It's here, it's available, we have the means for it, we have the money for it. But the way in which we communicate and share, love, and party, it just doesn't *feel* like home, in Trinidad. Does that make sense?"

I respond by saying, "It does make sense, because I know when I am here, I have a home. When I'm with my family, I am at home. But living in this country, I do not feel at home."

“That’s exactly it!” Ertha Violet cheers. “I know why it’s hard to explain. People who have never had to leave someplace they love don’t understand the emotional toll migration takes on a person. I still love it when people clap when the plane lands at Piarco airport. It tells me where I am, and I feel welcomed home. And when I leave, the feeling of home stays with me.”

With a sardonic grin, Bernadette points out her own cognizance of displacement.

“Every year around winter when I have to shovel snow, I am reminded that I am no longer in Trinidad. I used to long to be home at Christmas in the years my dad was alive but after that, no. I have no desire or need to go back to Trinidad. Going back to Trinidad for me, is hard now. I used to go back— two— maybe three times per year when my dad was alive. After he died, I didn’t go back for almost 15 years. Now? Christmas is here, in the U.S. My family is here—I have two boys. My mom lives with me and my sister who lives in Florida visits. Home is here now for me. I’ve built a life here and now when I go home to Trinidad, I don’t feel like I belong there either.”

In a hushed whisper I lean in to hear, Ertha Violet admits, “Trinidad also makes my heart smile.” Her face breaks into a gentle smile—the kind of smile that you feel from the inside before it shows on your face. “That’s where I met my husband and where we got married,” she reveals. “I loved developing Sunday evening traditions with my daughter—going for doubles, or ice cream. Some of my fondest memories of my entire life involve the love, culture, food of Trinidad. I miss playing mas’ and the beauty and splendor of our Carnival celebrations. I really, really miss that. That’s what home means to me.”

Symone nods to affirm Ertha Violet’s understanding of home before she contributes her perspective.

“Home will always be Trinidad even though when I go home, I can’t stay for an extended period of time. I enjoy going home but I am in contact with my parents regularly via WhatsApp. Sometimes though... I do just miss being at home in Trinidad. I miss leaving the house early and sitting on a kayak in the middle of the water as the sun is rising. I miss that. I miss being able to walk around Trinidad and feel comfortable. Although my mom is always warning me to be careful where I go when I am there. In a way it reminds me that I don’t live there anymore. Now, living in Georgia I do find ways to keep culture alive in my home and in my community. I have a great circle of Trinidadian friends here. So, as an example, when they heard my sister and her family were coming to visit they cooked fried King fish, dumplings and callaloo. I guess you can say I keep culture alive with me and around me.”

Nattie Girl interjects valiantly.

“Trinidad is the actual place I am from, and I allow the memory of home to travel with me in numerous ways. I think I get myself into situations that always deal with things like music—soca music, the Carnival, the listening to the stories, the food. And the people—always, the people around me. I am always centered by the cultural feelings and expressions of Trinidad, so I don’t really get that big tabanca³² for home. Well...unless it's Carnival!” [laughing]

Re-Creating Home Through Cultural Traditions

Cultural traditions are a large part of how we connect with other Trinidadians in our local homeplaces. I wanted to share a little about how I spent Christmas with my family so that we could share our experiences.

³² Tabanca is a Trinidadian term used to describe an intense longing and missing such as homesickness or lovesickness.

“I used to love Christmas time in Trinidad as a kid” I say fondly. “My uncle was a boss mandolin player and an alcoholic. At Christmas time he would always come by late at night, already ‘tight like crapaud back’³³ and ask for a drink. “Gelo,” he’d beg, “Gelo. Give me a little taste for a tune nah?” Reluctantly, my dad would give him a drink of rum from the Limbo man and my uncle would play a tune, as promised... I don’t remember doing much of the traditional cooking in our home apart from the ham, breads, sorrel and ginger beer. My mom was a career banker who didn’t seem to have time to do much of the traditional cooking for Christmas. I would join my aunts when they made pastelles. But most times, my mother would purchase pastelles and Black cake from her staff. Would you believe to this day, my aunt gives me six pastelles every year to ensure the Christmas tradition is upheld in the home.”

Bernadette’s poise is unmistakable in her voice when she says, “You come into my home and it’s soca music. I want soca music because it makes me happy. We even keep the food very Trini. My boys even grew up eating Trini food. I am a Trini. I don’t know what being American is but I know what I am and I am a Trinidadian till I die. I embrace the heritage, my culture. I’m a Trinidadian just residing in America...always, always Trinidadian, first.”

“Oh gosh,” Winer Gyal #1’s excitement is contagious. “Christmas time in Trinidad is a big deal. Not from the getting presents aspect but for all the traditions. When is Christmas we makin’ pastelles around the table. Everybody had a line, everybody had something to do, and we did it learning, doing, sharing stories, laughing. And now with my kids, although they are born Americans, I can’t let that tradition go. I know I cannot do the same things because they don’t have that same cohesiveness when it comes to family. My kids don’t know their cousins, everybody’s all over the world and there’s that disconnect. They don’t know what it means to

³³ Trinidadian colloquialism that means “drunk”

randomly visit family and run around and play, make a mess and eat snacks together. When they meet up anywhere it's always a little awkward like "who are you? You look like me, but I don't know you." And after they do get to know each other, we have to get on a plane and leave. I mourn that absence of closeness more than anything else. It breaks my heart. It really does and I don't know if I would ever get used to it."

You Cannot Always Go Back Home: Bernadette's Story

"Staying here in the U.S. was never my plan. But when I spoke with my dad, he encouraged me to continue on and not move back because he saw a shift in the country with the politics, the economy and an increase in crime. Growing up crime was minimal. We slept in homes where we didn't have to lock windows, we didn't have to lock doors. And in my neighborhood over time, we saw the rise in the youth and crimes. My dad reminded me that I have the world opened up to me. He said, "travel as much as you can. Explore as much as you can. Learn as much as you can. What are you coming back *here* to do?"

As it turns out, I did go back sooner than I planned. My father passed in 1994. It was a very horrible, horrible death. As you can tell by now, my dad and I were very close. He L-O-V-E-D Carnival and we would party together. That was our thing. But in 1994, I went home and when driving home from the airport, the driver was telling me about a known nuisance, a murderer—a killer—living in the area. The next day, I was talking with my dad in the gallery and I said, "dad, the guy that dropped me home mentioned a name. Do you know who he is?" And my dad became very still. He then told me about this person in the area who had been distressing the people in the neighborhood. Worried, I asked, "aren't you scared?" Then my

father informed me that he was not at all scared and that this guy tried to rob the house once, but he stood up to him and he left. I didn't say much about it, but what he said bothered me.

On Carnival Thursday my dad and I made arrangements for us to go to one of those parties. I was in the house with my younger brother getting ready. My dad was downstairs, so I called out to him to see if he was ready. He said he was coming up soon since he was chatting with a village friend who was also visiting for the Carnival. And while I am ironing my clothes, I heard what I thought—I had never heard gunshots—was like two pieces of metal coming together and making this loud explosive noise. My little brother, who was nine at the time ran to me and I asked, “What is that noise?” He told me it's gunshots. Frantically, in a frightened whisper I repeated, “gunshots?” And then more desperately I turned to him asking, "where is dad? "

Dad was downstairs. I ran to the back door where I'm standing, calling out hysterically, “Dad! Dad! Dad!” Nothing. Now, I am petrified. This is beyond scary. I don't know what happened...I suddenly find myself hugging my brother and I am fearful, shocked. I don't know what to do. I'm not hearing my father calling back to me saying he's okay. By now it is around two or three o'clock in the morning. I just huddled my little brother until someone came to the door. I somehow managed to say, “I think something is wrong with my dad. Can you please go check?” And when he came back, he said, “Your dad is dead.”

“I stayed in Trinidad for about six months. Trying to come back to myself, to deal with what I just experienced that I never in my lifetime thought I would have. My dad... I didn't even, ever think of my dad dying. To be honest with you, I never ever thought of him not being alive...and to die like that so violent, so suddenly. He was just 56 when he died that tragic death. I was broken.”

“I grew up in a village. It *was* a village. Everyone knew everyone. We knew the neighbor, the shopkeeper across the street. But when that situation happened with my dad, I felt a disconnect with my villagers. No one spoke up. And they *knew* who did it. And no one said anything. I understand later on that they didn’t speak up because they were all fearful for their own lives. So, there I was in my early 20s and I had to deal with all of this. I had to take that big sister role, that big daughter role and make funeral arrangements for my father who died, violently, suddenly, and tragically. I went from being a happy young woman to taking on a huge responsibility in a day while managing trauma and loss, dealing with my mental health. It was hard. It still is.”

“I tell myself that I have to live, and I have to move on. There were days and nights that I would dream like I would be having a conversation with him. At times I felt inconsolable but I believe he’s guiding me. I believe he’s here with me. I think about my father often. I really took for granted how much I relied on him. He was a guaranteed presence in my life. I felt like life robbed me of him. I still feel that raw brokenness.”

There was radio silence after Bernadette spoke. I had never met someone who lost a parent to a violent death. My heart felt sore for her. Now I know what that look of sadness was in her eyes whenever she mentioned her dad. It was the glint of grief that comes with the memory of losing someone you love. Although I didn’t lose my dad tragically, as a daddy’s girl I know what that kind of brokenness feels like. I felt tears in my eyes. And even when I said, “I am so sorry,” it sounded insufficient. Sometimes, when you most need them, words fail.

Feeling Fragmented, Feeling Foreign

Winer Gyal#1 is leaning forward with her right hand under her neck, just by her collar bone. She wants to offload a part of her experience. She needs to shed this weight.

“My presence in America signaled a difference that was noticed by both white America and Black America. But even then, I moved into little Trinidad. I was still around people that were like me. I lived in Brooklyn. And when you live in Brooklyn you hear a lot of tongues that are familiar. I was still able to still participate in Labor Day celebrations, I was eating Trinidad food. I mean, if you go around the corner, you could buy callaloo bush. I still had that. So, initially, I never really became aware that I was a Trinidadian in a foreign country. To be honest, it didn't really affect me until I moved here to Texas where you stand out even more as a Black woman *and* as a foreigner.”

“I lived, I worked, I pushed and kept my head down and did what I had to do. I went to college and from college I applied to grad programs. I did that and worked with the family I lived with when I first moved helping them sell food. They had a food truck—big business—that served curry and roti, right around the corner from the World Trade Center every day. And if you looked in that truck, I would be the one peeling the 20-pound bag of potato. I was getting about \$200 a week and I saved almost all my money. Come rain, shine, or snow, we went out. I used to be in that truck standing up, feeling my toes freezing for hours. But you know how we do, you keep your head down and just push.”

I paused for a short time while listening to Winer Gyal #1's story of working in the freezing winters and saving all her money. I worked on campus for the maximum of 20 hours as an International student when the minimum wage was \$5.15. I would pick up occasional extra gigs that paid cash, but I definitely didn't save all my money. I might have found ways to save

money, like borrowing library books instead of funding overpriced bookstores but I never saw a need to save it all. On Fridays, after we got paid, I would buy some stamps to mail letters to my friends in Trinidad, and then I was out at Roosevelt Field Mall with my friend Liza, buying cheap, cute little outfits at Rainbow to wear to Latin Quarter or the Copa on the weekend. I am reminded of her earlier comment that we are all subject to a range of experiences even in migration.

Winer Gyal #1 picks up her speech after her poignant pause.

“I had a goal. I knew where I wanted to go and what I was trying to do with school. In addition to working with the food truck I also worked at a coffee shop. That’s when I met my husband. All the time, keep on pushing. I got here and I didn’t know anything. I didn’t understand American blackness and the politics of race here. There are differences between being born into the U.S. as a Black American and being perceived as being Black American because you live here. Why should I have to defend myself for being myself? I am always explaining some part about me to these people. I really resent having to explain myself as a Trinidadian living in America.”

Symone has been standing to stretch her legs a little, and she spins around when Winer Gyal #1 finishes talking to join in.

“You reminding me of these roommates I had...” Symone’s buoyancy is irresistible, and I know, from her tone, that pure picong³⁴ was coming our way.

“You know, soon after I came here, some person actually asked me if we have “crackers” in Trinidad. And, not understanding it was a racial slur at the time, I said, “yes, we have something called *Crix* and we eat it with cheese.” And I just went on and on explaining how to

³⁴ A term used in Trinidad to describe a light hearted banter.

eat Crix and cheese almost tasting the damn Crix and cheese in my mouth ...and then she stopped me and said, "I'm talking about white people." Well damn! How was I supposed to know that? I told her we have white looking people who we call fair skinned or light skinned or high-colored but we don't call them "white" people." *Talk about lost in translation.*

"What about when you return to the U.S. from Trinidad, do you feel any kind of way?" I asked, curiously.

Nattie Girl had her no-nonsense tone when she spoke. "When I come through U.S. Customs Border Patrol, I don't ever feel uncomfortable in that space. I have an American passport, ya know? I actually get more uncomfortable knowing that I'm coming back to work, to all the stress, to all the bills. To be honest, I get more not offended ...but...annoyed.... when I go to Trinidad because I don't have a Trinidad passport. It expired. When you go to Trinidad, they tell you how long you can stay in the country and that bugs me out. It had one time I was coming out of Trinidad and an officer, pulled me aside to harass me as I was leaving. He asking me, "Why yuh was here?" What I supposed to tell him, eh? This man, talking to me like I am a foreigner, a visitor and saying stupidity like " thanks for coming to our country." Talking to me—*me*— like I wasn't born here. Steups. Man, I born here just like you!"

Symone chuckles. "When I go to Trinidad, I enter the country on my Trinidad passport and leave on my U.S. passport. It's nice when you come back to the U.S. not having to join those lines anymore, you know?" says Symone. "I was more conscious of my status as a Trinidadian returning to the U.S. in those Customs lines but once I became a citizen, less so. I just act like I am supposed to be there because anything other than that draws unnecessary and negative attention."

On Becoming [a] Citizen

“You know, I vaguely remember my swearing in ceremony,” Bernadette adds softly. “I had already been a Permanent Resident for so long so that when I became a citizen, it was just a process, the next step. I don't remember if I felt elated. I would like to think when I became a citizen, I would have had that ‘wow’ moment like ‘yes, finally I am a citizen.’ But I really didn't. It was just something more I had to do because I had kids, I wanted the right to vote and to have a voice. I mean one of the highlights of my life was voting before I left Trinidad. I was so proud I felt like I had just officially become a woman. I was 18 and I felt like that was my rite of passage to be a woman, and to vote. I was so proud. In the U.S. I think I started my voting process with Clinton, and I was happy to vote.”

Bernadette showed the sweetest smile as she mentioned how happy she was to vote. I wonder if it also triggered a memory of a special moment she once shared with her father. I didn't have the time to ask before Winer Gyal#1 chimed in.

“Funny enough, I vaguely remember my swearing in for citizenship. I only learned the Pledge of Allegiance because of my kids but I stumbled through it at my swearing in ceremony. I remember paying about \$600 for my biometrics and being worried about the citizenship interview. Remember we had to learn these 100 questions for the exam? This process for me was like living with fear that just wouldn't leave. I remember thinking, wondering: “will they suddenly realize I was living a sham?” I was so fed up and just tired of putting on this whole farce. So many secrets. Gosh, this was such a stressful time for me. Only God helped me through all of that.”

Winer Gyal#1 stares out into space for a little while as though she were re-living the naturalization process as a kind of step-by-step replay. I too, am thrown back in time to all the

terrible guilt, the daily suppressed and internalized nausea that accompanied years of secret keeping. It is and was, a stressful time of subversively enduring uncertainty.

Nattie Girl's experience of citizenship was entirely different because her Green Card sponsorship had already been approved prior to her arrival to the U.S.

"I remember when I finally became a citizen in 1990 (or 1996?), to file the papers was less than \$80. We went right down to Tillary Street in Brooklyn. I was pretty excited, happy. I told everybody in my family. Everybody was excited for me. And I had a lunch party— of course— with my family."

I could sense the excitement in her as she recaptured the details of this historical moment. She took a few minutes to delve into the significance of having an American citizenship.

"I understand my U.S. citizenship as being an avenue to accomplish things. I definitely encourage voting and I participate in voting. I see the voting process—no matter how compromised— is needed to make change. Although I am legally American, it does not trump (no pun intended) my feeling of being a Trinidadian citizen. With my U.S. citizenship I feel great, full even but it's not the be all and end all. Being a Trinidadian citizen gives me a sense of being, belonging and being a part of the Republic for all times. I feel that I'm mostly Trinidadian because that's where I was born and that's what I am. That's home. However, I've had to adapt and I've had to identify with different things, different behaviors and ways of functioning in America."

I am intrigued by these unnamed codes of behavior and although she does not specifically state them, I recognize the ways we become challenged to re-define ourselves in the U.S. in the context of cultural performances of race, gender, class, and citizenship.

Affective Citizenship

I am curious about how the women who didn't come to the U.S. with a Green Card were able to secure their legal status. I understood the avenues required to attain it, but I was wondering about the paths they took to get there. Perhaps if I share my own story, they might feel more comfortable telling theirs. And even as I share my story, I wonder how they are processing my story and me, in front of them.

“When I left Trinidad with the guy I was dating, he started getting in my ear saying that I could just get married and get a secure status” said Winer Gyal#1. “He was just a permanent resident, and he was thinking I could get married to his cousin who is a citizen to get through. I'm not joking. I left Trinidad with the intention to execute this business transaction.”

This was quite the ambitious plan that would require a lot of secrecy, I thought.

“I still don't really talk about it because you can't really talk about it to just anyone. You have to be careful, and you just learn how to keep your business to yourself. I saved the money for the application, and we did it. We got married while I was living in New York, and he was living in the South. This was its own problem. How do I prove that we are married when I am here, and he is there? It was a whole drama. I was in school, which was my justification, but we had to create this whole life. Granted I was living with his family so that diluted some of the deception. It took almost two and a half years for me to get my Green Card and I think I slipped through a crack. After our first interview, my passport still wasn't stamped “approved” and they wanted more information. Can you imagine how much anxiety and worry I had eating away at me after that? What could I do? Life doesn't stop. I still had to go to school, go to work, bills to pay. I had to live every day and just act normal although inside I was freaking out.”

“I was just like you wondering, what I would do if it doesn't go through? I'm still living with these people and by then, me and my boyfriend had broken up. It was very weird to say the least. But then I started dating my husband and he didn't really know the *whole* situation. It not exactly the kind of conversation that just flows out your mouth. I *really* liked this man but hello, I was married and living with my ex-boyfriend's family and waiting to find out if my petition for residency is approved. I was freaking out. My parents and my aunts knew what was happening and it became a whole family like effort to keep me together, mentally. Pray, pray, pray. And, and I don't know how else to explain it but girl, God just made it happen. I felt like there were so many times when I was panicking inside, the kind of jittery panic that makes you feel sick, like you want to vomit. All the time wondering, worrying. What am I going to do?? Am I not going to be able to finish school? It was a very dark time for me, very worrisome.”

I can see the embodiment of her worry as she begins pulling her hair.

“When my Green Card came in the mail, I felt like the brick on my back just fell off. I was so relieved. It was just God. I was in disbelief. It was intense not having given myself the freedom to feel happy for so long, but I was so glad. I waited five years before I got divorced and filed for citizenship on my own. All this bullshit you have to deal with, digging the hole deeper.”

I understand this sentiment too well. So does Symone.

“Well, after 9-11 I couldn't find work to do my Optional Practical Training (OPT) and after four years of school, living and working in Miami I packed up everything and moved back home to Trinidad. Before I went home, I applied to the Ministry of Tourism for a job. I have a Master's degree so it's a guaranteed job, right? Remember, I was taught that if you study, you get good grades, go to college, you get your degree these things will *guarantee* a job. No. I begrudgingly ended up taking a job through the Ministry of Labor, but the attitude stunk of “who

she feel she is?” I had to wonder if I was the damn fool! I thought I am coming back home to share my knowledge and do something good for my country and myself. And these people, looking at me with contempt like they’re mad about what I have accomplished and somehow with my qualifications it’s as though their job is suddenly in jeopardy! Coming back home was very difficult. I wasn’t prepared for how difficult it would be. My expediency came across as me showing off or trying to show up other people. To them I was a nobody who was over educated and too eager, so nobody was taking me seriously.”

“A couple years after I returned, an old injury started acting up— my left leg was paralyzed and my sciatica became excruciatingly painful. I was able to participate in a free experimental treatment the U.S. but being in the U.S. for an extended period posed a legal quandary. I thought about returning to school, but the U.S. embassy told me that I didn’t “need any more degrees.” What was I to do? Things were seriously not working out for me anywhere—not in Trinidad, not in New York. Around this time, I reconnected with someone I knew who lived in Atlanta and I explained that I will just go home to Trinidad and consider flying back and forth and take painkillers. He flat out told me I “cannot” go back home. I went to visit him in Atlanta and off we went to the courthouse and got married.

Social Citizenship

“Do you feel as though you belong or fit in here in the U.S. since you’ve become a citizen?” I ask.

“I can start,” Ertha Violet began. “We became citizens about five years after we migrated. By the time I completed my Master’s Degree, I was still struggling with positioning myself here in the U.S. Even after more than a decade, I still felt like I didn’t belong. I kept, as

we say, spinning top in mud ³⁵ trying to figure out where I belong between these two worlds of America and Trinidad. Intuitively, I *knew* I didn't know who I was. I felt like a part of me was missing. My thoughts traveled and I began to wonder, "maybe I belong in Trinidad?" Maybe if I go back to Trinidad and do something meaningful, perhaps that will help me figure out who I am and help solidify these missing parts of my identity. I followed my thoughts and went back to Trinidad. I finally played mas' when I was about 28 years old. Can you believe it? And, I met my husband when I was 30 years old, around the time I was doing my PhD. Eventually we got married and I lived in Trinidad for ten more years. I never finished the degree because I got pregnant with my daughter. I returned to the U.S. to have her, but then we returned to Trinidad to be with my husband. He had a good job working in the oil and gas industry. Our life in Trinidad was wonderful. We would fly up to the States two or three times a year to visit my parents. It was great. But then my husband got retrenched and we started to think it might be time to leave if he couldn't find work within a reasonable time frame. It took him about two years to get a decent job back home in Trinidad and those two years were quite difficult. It was during that time we began the process to return to the States."

I could feel the shift in her thinking as she adjusted her posture.

"We returned to the U.S. in 2016, after Trump won and it was the first time I had begun to question the relevance of having a U.S. citizenship. I found myself having to come to terms with the truth of America and the very racist America into which we were about to live in and raise children in. We had to decide—do we still pack up and go into this racist America? This is absolutely not the way America has existed for me with this racist undercurrent taking over. I felt

³⁵ A Trinidadian expression used to express frustration that signals being stuck or unable to progress.

it. It changed everything that I ever imagined I thought about this country. We didn't pick a good year to return to the U.S.”

“And here we are now, in 2021” adds Bernadette. “Post Obama, post Trump (but Trumpers aren't going anywhere) and here trying to do something with Biden during Covid. I used to be more comfortable living and being here in the U.S but not anymore. I think 2020 opened up the filthy guts of this country. The reality that a lot of people didn't want to know or accept, 2020 revealed. So, if someone were to ask me to talk to my 17-year-old self wanting to leave Trinidad, I would not choose America again.”

Ertha Violet sighs loudly.

“I am honestly just trying to take it one day at a time” she says with a sense of resignation. “We are all trying to hold our own, keep it real (but not too real), stay employed and live, in spite of what they try to do to us. We dare not respond in anger because now we will be branded “angry Black women” which is a problem for them. Instead, we sacrifice our inner peace to be team players no matter how they make us feel. But then these white women start crying over trivial things and I'm expected to be sympathetic.”

Winer Gyal #1 scans the room to see if anyone was about to speak up before she did.

“You would think that once I became an American citizen I would feel differently, as though I belong? No eh. And I've felt this for a while now. At first my husband and I thought that we would eventually move back to Trinidad. We thought that we're doing this for a period of time and then we will leave. Save money, pay off my student loans and then, we're going to move back to Trinidad. That was the plan while living in New York. But life is funny because while living and working in New York we had our first child. So now we are wondering how are we going to keep up this rat race, save money, raise a child, and go back home? How are we

going to do that? Part of me wanted to move back home to Trinidad but at the same time I felt like I belonged more in New York, but I'm still not really an American, right? I want to move back home. We put our heads together and figured we should move somewhere where we can save more money. We googled "best places to raise a family" and ended up in Houston."

I felt my left eyebrow shoot up when she invoked the state of Texas.

"We moved to Houston with the intent of low cost of living, but now you're even more under the microscope because you're Caribbean! A Caribbean identity is like a complete hot red blinking sign in this Republican state I'm now living in. I didn't even *consider* this issue when we were initially moving to Houston. I didn't even think how politics would factor into our lives. I really didn't consider it. I just thought, "best place to raise a kid with a family." Anyway, here we are in Texas, under the microscope even more and already wondering "let's see how long we could do this before we move back to Trinidad." But then as time goes on, you start settling in. And somehow, the plan starts changing... I'd go back to Trinidad to visit, and I would start feeling like, I don't belong there. I don't feel like I am home. I feel like a fish out of water. One of my oldest friends is still in Trinidad and we were real close but our friendship changed over the course of the years that we lived here because we live apart, right? But going back and visiting, I just feel like I don't belong there. Even in my own family, I don't belong. And then you're here. And you don't belong here either."

"I relate too well" Bernadette says. "This is my home now, but do I feel like I belong here in the U.S.? No. But, it's where I am, where my sons are, where my mom is. But there are times, like in 2020 when the bulb just kind of went out of me. To confront the reality of how we, as Black people are looked at in this country and I am a citizen. "

“When I go home, even choosing a line to stand becomes a moral and legal problem” says Winer Gyal #1. “Last time I was in Trinidad was in 2018 when my grandpa died, he was 102. In the airport, can you believe I didn’t know which line to choose? Do I go in the line for ‘Visitors’ or do I go in the ‘Citizens’ line? I always struggle with that, but my passport has now expired so I guess, it will be “visitor” for me. Although I enter on my U.S. passport, I don’t feel like a U.S. person. I’m a Trini. But they don’t see you that way in that space. They don’t look at you like that at all. It’s truly like being a fish out of water. That’s what I feel when I go to Trinidad. It is nostalgic, yes. I see my family, of course. I eat all the good food and go visit people. But it’s all foreign and I feel like a foreigner doing it. I’m not, comfortable.”

Symone offers an alternative perspective on this issue.

“I don’t feel unsafe in spite of 2016 and even, January 6th. Even though I live in Georgia, and people walk around here with their guns like normal because it’s a free carry state. Here in America, I know that I am an American citizen but I am not attached to being American. I do, however engage in the privilege of my American citizenship. I contribute by paying taxes. I know the importance of local government and I vote. I understand the importance of having a voice and raising it to be heard locally. I am very plugged into what happens in my community. But anytime somebody asks me “Where are you from?” The answer is always, Trinidad. I am a Trinidadian. Punto finale. I am proud of being Trinidadian. No matter where I am I will always say I am Trinidadian not Trinidadian-American, I don’t know what that is. I never say I am American, even to foreigners.”

Nattie Girl thinks for a moment and then she says, “In spite of it all, I definitely feel like I belong here in the U.S. The Obama to Trump years have been this series of awakening and learning. With Obama, I felt empowered. Trump: What the fuck? Survival, yes. And Mr. Biden

we don't know yet because he just start ...It's a real struggle but we know how to put our head down and handle our business.”

Coping with (Un)Belonging

“What do you struggle most with about being Trinidadian and American?” I ask the question to get a sense of how these women were coping with the daily struggles of belonging and difference.

Ertha Violet smiles appreciatively at my question.

“It always feels like people are trying to figure out exactly *how* American I am, and I know I become defensive. It’s insulting. It’s as though they are trying to somehow quantify how much stake I have in this country because to them, I speak a little funny while my daughter speaks very much “American.” My daughters’ surname is Chinese, but they are not Chinese-American. They are Black women, mixed ethnicity. I have to do what I can to help protect and empower them for when their time comes. Because, it will come. I just want to get my job done, collect my salary, go home to my family and just live, enjoy life. These people really hack away at your spirit.”

“It just it comes down to making do” Winer Gyal #1 says. “At some point, mentally we decided to make it work. Because now we have two kids —and that changes how you see things and how you can do things. In the last four years there were many, many times when I asked my husband, “What we doin' *here*? What *we* doin' *here*? *What*?” Not only what are we doing in Texas but what are we doing in the United States? I have already proven to myself that I can make it anywhere. I left Trinidad and moved to the United States. Big culture shock, big culture change but I did it. I moved to New York which was cold. Culture shock again. And now,

Texas? I've already proven that I could do that. *Why are we still here?* We say we can make it anywhere, we can go anywhere so again, why are we still here? I am really struggling mentally because I don't feel like we belong anywhere.”

“We’re caught now because we have two kids and it's their future now, right? We have to figure out what type of future we want for them and what we want them to grow up knowing. It then becomes like a sacrifice. You sacrifice for them by living in suburbia because you want them to go to nice schools, you want them to get a good education. But in suburbia— how diverse is suburbia? So that's another sacrifice. *What we really doin' here?*”

“I have two Black children and I think after growing up Caribbean, I now feel ill equipped to teach them about asserting a Black identity because we didn't know it. We didn't have that experience. I don't know the history of this country well enough to feel as though I could guide them properly. Another layer, right? I feel more vulnerable because I don't know how to arm them with all the Black empowerment and what to do if they have run ins with the police. My son asked me about George Floyd and my brain was freaking out. What I supposed to tell this child? It was my son who said, " I'm just gonna stay inside momma." It broke my heart. It still bothers me and I still don't know how to help. We talked about it although I still don't feel that we, as parents did a good job. We couldn't say definitively, “this is what you need to do.” Then I turn to my husband and told him that as a Black man he needed to step up and have the conversation. And I don't think he even knew what to say.”

“Growing up Trini was so carefree and the experience of living in this country is so burdensome. We grew up seeing people, our color, be doctors, be lawyers, be teachers, all these things. Here, you're the outsider, the anomaly when you succeed. So how do you prepare children for that? These are my questions and my struggles: how do I (other than leading by

example) help them? I grew up knowing that education is paramount. And fortunately (or unfortunately) for my kids, it's the same thing in this house. I'm trying to teach them through example. But there are other things that you can't teach them and to be honest, I feel ill equipped to teach them. I don't know. The struggle is real. And our white counterparts never have to live this way, constantly questioning every decision they make. They just live. None of this affects them. They don't even have to think about it."

Ertha Violet replies to Winer Gyal#1 with compassion.

"Part of how I try to resolve these feelings is by keeping up with the lives of other Trinidadians in the U.S. and abroad who are doing well. For instance, Dr. Wayne Frederick who is the President of Howard University. I follow his achievements through Instagram. I've never met him but this is my form of coping, of navigating the complex issues I deal with daily. It also helps me to empower my girls so that their story will be different than mine. It is sometimes hard to understand this life here in America. We were never denied access to doing anything in Trinidad except maybe getting into certain carnival bands!"

Raucous laughter explodes! Cultural insiders appreciate the complexity embedded in this welcome joke. We laugh a little at the cruel and classed reality of economic and social access to a national festival. But that was a conversation for another day.

Ertha Violet continues, "I've often felt my responsibility entails not perpetuating stereotypes against African American women, or Black American women. Sometimes the pervasive, negative stereotypes travel all the way down to our two dots of TnT. It's all talk that people cannot substantiate. I do my best not to perpetuate the narrative."

"I think the only reason I hyphenate with the word American is because of the U.S. passport. I consider myself a Trinidadian-American woman in part because of the amount of

time that I've lived here and because of the sacrifices that my family made for us to be here. My parents sacrificed a lot for us to have that 'Blue Book' and gave us an opportunity to earn an honest living and have a decent life. So that's why I identify in that way. With my daughter, it's a little more complicated...no matter how we identify, she identifies as an American."

Ertha Violet shifts the tone in the conversation to something that brings her joy.

"Would you believe my husband bought me a sewing machine during the Covid lockdown since I had always wanted to sew? I found a new community of Black women that sew and they reinforced in me that I am creative, that I am strong, that I am passionate, that I am powerful. Although I was stuck territorially due to both Covid and the border closure in Trinidad, I became unstuck and innovative. Before this, I tried therapy, but I was paired with a white woman and after three sessions I realized I was wasting my time with her. I needed to do more than just survive. Sewing ignited excitement and passion within me and I hope my brothers and sisters who might feel the same way—stuck, frustrated, dispirited—that they might try something new, find a safe space to be free. We are all just trying to be happy in the moment. All we have is right now."

Symone is decidedly more reflective speaking this time around.

"When you think about what you leave in your homeland, what you leave behind, you also realize that America is not all that it's cracked up to be. Make sure you have people that can ground you, because you could get lost here so much and so easily. Be proud of your heritage, be proud of your culture. And continue to be a vital part of your community wherever you go, period. So that when people meet you they'll say, "hey, she different she's, she's a Trini."

Survival Tool Kit

I ask,” if you were to offer any advice, as part of a survival tool kit to your younger self or to someone who is migrating to the U.S. for the first time, knowing what you know now what would it be?”

Ertha Violet: “If anyone were leaving Trinidad to come to the U.S. in these days, I would tell them, pack their source of spirituality. It can be a feather, a handkerchief from a grandparent, the Quran, or the Bible. Bring as much money with you as you can, more than you think you will need. Hold onto and keep the bonds you have formed prior to leaving. Keep close to your friends, family, or community—those people you know you can truly rely on. America can be a very lonely place. Learn the system, keep your morals and values as you try to navigate this country. Difficult times will come and it will test you and your faith.”

Bernadette: “You know the expression —we plan, God laughs. I hope anyone who is leaving Trinidad or thinking about leaving Trinidad knows that to survive here, they need to stay focused because you can come here and easily be led astray. Come with a strong sense of self because you can encounter situations and people that can break you down and try to make you feel less than who you are. Be proud of who you are. Embrace your culture. Don’t try to change and especially don’t try to change for other people. We are Trinidadians. Our parents did a good job in making us grounded and giving us a good foundation that we, now, as adults, can build on. So don't ever try to lose that. And with that you can survive anywhere.”

Nattie Girl: “I would tell anybody before you pack up and leave home, before you leave sweet Trinidad know what it is you are doing. Get to learn the knowledge of the land. Know why yuh from and what is expected of you when you leave your land, your house. And when you get to the new place where you're going, you're going to need to keep those values with you

at all times—forever. Be adaptable to what you need to do to survive, to create an environment for your family that is conducive to their positive life and life growth. You should also keep numbers of family members here and abroad—and I mean, people that you can really count on!”

Winer Gyal#1: “Seriously though, I would tell anyone coming from the Caribbean wanting to study to go somewhere else. Go to Europe if you want to have a world view. America is very weird, ignorant on many levels. Americans only consider themselves and they don’t care about having a world view.”

Symone: “I would tell someone who is thinking of migrating to the U.S. to think again. You do not need a degree. Yes, having one helps in some industries but a lot of my friends to include myself have degrees and they are not even working in the field of study of their discipline. I would still tell anyone to come with the understanding that the U.S. is not the land of milk and honey. Appreciate the things that you have at home and the things that you were taught at home. Be open to learning and having different experiences. Do not limit yourself to only staying in one place. Remember, the things that we were taught as young children and hold on to those morals and those values. It’s important. To every single one of us out there and over here I say: Keep speaking with the sea breeze in your voice. It’s like a warm Caribbean hug for all who hear it. If you know you’re coming to do something, focus and push your way through.”

Farewells

It’s getting late and although in Trinidad we say, “doh mash up the lime,” it is getting to a point where folks need to get home. I am energized by our conversations tonight and I still have lots of questions cluttering my mind about the conversation we had today. The night air is dewy and there’s a little chill—about 70 degrees Fahrenheit— that is referred to as ‘cold’ by locals

only. We start the process of cleaning up and Nattie Girl signals that she has to leave. Just before we do, I ask everyone if they have anything that they would like to say before we part ways.

Winer Gyal #1 is still reflecting on aspects of our conversation which has struck a chord in her.

“I have to believe and maybe it’s just that some part of me wants to believe that things will get better. I don’t know if it will happen in our lifetime. I’m a cynic. Racists are breeding more racists. Then again, I feel like there has been change somewhat... like on my kids’ level. They are having a different experience even though they’re still the one Black kid in a group of white kids all the time. Many of their relationships are more pure and it feels like they’re being seen for who they are not just their skin color. I don’t know that it is enough. My utopia world would be where the people from all over not just Black or white— everybody— could all live in the same subdivision and we all eat different foods and we go to a party. Sorry, I’m a little cynical right now. I am so over the United States. I really am. But doh mind me yuh know, I’m excited for you.”

“Comeon” Symone jeers at me, “do you think you would have pushed yourself as hard as you have if you didn’t leave Trinidad?” *I don’t know the definitive answer to that, but I suspect, probably not.*

“I will say that I was happy to learn about your study” interjects Ertha Violet. “I felt like “Oh my God! There are other women who are in my shoes and experiencing all of these issues and these challenges that I have been navigating for years.” I love it that you are providing this opportunity, for creating this space for women such as myself. I’ve wanted to share my story for years. I’ve thought about my own identity and my positioning. I’ve been in spaces where it’s been interrogated and in those of moments, I’ve often wondered if anyone would be interested to hear

like what I'm going through. I've wondered if there are other Black women of Afro-Trinidadian descent, who were in my shoes, who were somehow struggling to figure out their own identity for any number of complex reasons. When I read your study description, I felt really, really excited. I felt as though: this is it, this is my chance. I appreciate you and your work. Today I felt so safe talking with you. Maybe what we learn to do is find home in each other, in our smiles, in our shared experiences.”

I leave these conversations feeling uplifted, empowered, and hopeful. So many nuanced layers of experience emerged in our meeting. I can't help but think that many of the strident feelings of hostility toward me by cultural others could be the result of misrecognition and misunderstandings about difference that come from a place of unfamiliarity mixed with fear. I am reminded now of Zora Neale Huston (2006) who, proclaimed, “that there is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you” (p. 67). Perhaps the process of confronting these difficult stories will motivate these women, and others like them/us to use the power of their voice to inspire change in their communities and among those who hear or read their words.

CHAPTER FOUR:

ANALYZING CITIZENSHIP, BELONGING, IDENTITY AND HOME

This chapter draws on the stories from Nattie Girl, Winer Gyal #1, Bernadette, Symone, and Ertha Violet (Chapter Three) to further examine the complexities of these im/migrant women's cultural-relational realities with respect to issues of citizenship, belonging, identity, and home. I expound upon the affective dimension to citizenship as an extension of social citizenship as belonging by demonstrating the tensions between the "constraining power of affective citizenship and its emancipatory potential" (Fortier, 2016, p. 1039), as evidenced by the articulated, affective, embodied weight of difference shown in their stories.

The chapter is organized based on the prevalent themes I've identified from my conversations with the women and how each theme relates to research questions that guide this dissertation.

Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class, and National Identities

Issues of identity understandably underscore many of the cultural performances of these women as it relates to race, gender, class, and nationality. Nationality was a significant marker of both ethnic and national difference. As a critical theory of identity, intersectionality describes a process of interlocking oppressions related to race, class, gender (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993) and, in this study, the layered dynamic of nationality. As previously mentioned, all of my participants identify as being Black, Trinidadian, American women. Not all of the women identify as

Trinidadian-American. The hyphenated identity was only comfortable for some of them not all, who see themselves as always Trinidadian with an American citizenship living in America. This distinction suggests some ambivalence as well as conflicting, if not, dichotomous, emotions, as part of an ongoing process of being and becoming citizens of two countries.

I asked each woman when they began to think of themselves as a Black woman. Their answers led us to have rich dialogue on raced and gendered identity negotiation, and difference for im/migrants in this tripartite marginalization as Black, female and im/migrant. As such the question largely informs this opening section of the analysis.

Racial Identity: On Being a Black Trinidadian, American Woman

Each of my participants identifies as a Black woman, but not all of them identified race as being a major factor in who they understand themselves to be overall. Yet, one of the key ideas that arises in speaking with these women is the delayed cognizance of being a Black woman and developing a Black identity. For instance, Nattie Girl references being a Trinidadian and being a Caribbean person, noting that the idea of being a Black woman can be essentializing because “you kind of get grouped into a system or a narrative” (p. 107). Instead, she prefers to assert that she is more than *just* a Black woman. She relies on her accent to help situate her identity as a Black woman from Trinidad. By her own admission, Nattie Girl fervently rejects the essentializing umbrella of U.S. racial blackness because she values being Trinidadian above being categorized as “just” another Black person.

In her story, Bernadette admits that she never identified as a Black woman in her younger years even though her neighborhood was predominantly Black. Only when she was becoming a teenager did she notice that “the boys were looking more at the lighter skin girls and the girls

with the long, flowy hair” (p. 105).³⁶ These experiences made her keenly aware of her gendered blackness to the extent that she began to question herself as a Black woman and wonder, “Am I enough? Am I doing enough?”(p. 105). In fact, the answer to this question is what led Bernadette to the U.S. to advance her education, so that she’ll “be seen more . . . liked more.” (p. 105). In addition, Bernadette describes a pivotal moment of self-acceptance in her late teen years that was instigated by her father who chopped off her attempt at hair straightening. His actions are significant because hair straightening is associated with white women’s beauty standards (Patton, 2006). The underlying issue is that for Black women’s hair to be seen as acceptable, it needs to be altered to meet white women’s standards. To help her unlearn these colonial and imperialist ideals, her father impressed upon her that her natural hair is beautiful and absolutely acceptable. He wanted her to be proud of being a Black woman, and part of this pride, to him at least, was in Bernadette displaying her natural hair. This radical parental act helped Bernadette to construct a positive Black identity; so much so that when she moved to the U.S., she arrived already performing a “strong sense” of self that enabled her to not feel self-conscious being around lighter skinned Blacks and non-Black persons as she once did as a teenager.

Bernadette speaks of her dad with an unmistakable love and gentleness, sharing that “much of the shaping of my identity came from my dad,” (p. 105) which resonates with the positive role my father played in my own becoming. At the same time, her experience contrasts those of the other women, including me, who didn’t have an avowed “Black identity” until we moved to the U.S. Having a Black identity in Trinidad had been taken-for-granted because we were constantly surrounded by people who looked like us in various professions and dissimilar

³⁶ See, Boylorn, 2013; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Patton, 2006

class statuses. However, once we migrated to the U.S., a new and different Black identity needed to be constructed based on our daily interactions with other people.

Geographical location plays a part in how Winer Gyal #1 understands her identity. In moving from New York City to the state of Texas, she expresses feeling as though she stood out more as a “Black woman *and* as a foreigner” (p. 123). These seemingly separate identities are representative of her daily embodiment of difference. She resigns to the notion that “to the outside world we are all Black American” and strongly asserts that, although she is Black, she is neither Black American nor African American. Believing that the born-and-bred African American experience is a departure from how she grew up in Trinidad, Winer Gyal #1 acknowledges that there are differences, but cannot explain why they exist. She tries to reason by connecting the potential differences and range of lived experience of Trinidadians living in Trinidad who did not enjoy a middle-class status and privileged education. In so doing, she suggests there are a range of experiences and material realities for African Americans as well.

A political citizenship is recognizable within systems of oppression that are magnified by legal documents and imposing classification systems. Winer Gyal #1 prefers to be classified as “Caribbean-American” (p. 107). When forced to self-identify on legal documents, she chooses “other” in the absence of an accurate representation of her national identity. She resents having to identify herself to others as “a Trinidadian living in America” *and* “as a Black woman” (p. 109) to both white and Black Americans. The naming and labeling practice reminds her how her Black body is controlled and surveilled in the U.S. and reiterates how naming and labeling serve as a “prerogative of power” (Miller & Swift, 1993, p. ix) in Black women’s im/migration experiences. Also, although Winer Gyal #1 internalizes the weight and frustration associated with this “spoiled” (i.e., disfavored, or abject) identity (Goffman, 1963), she simultaneously

wrestles with her own feelings of being “ill equipped” to teach her two born Black American children how to assert a U.S. Black identity.

I pause here to recognize why naming our experiences is critical to our survival. bell hooks (1989) explains that “simply describing one’s experience of exploitation or oppression” (p. 107) is not sufficient. hooks (1989) goes on to state that we must know the personal and “speak it” in a different way because it might mean “naming spaces of ignorance gaps in knowledge, ones that render us unable to link the personal with the political” (p. 107). Therefore, naming and knowing work together in constructing the language and the necessary work that can be transformational and reflective of a range of lived experience.

The role of Caribbean mothers and grandmothers in shaping identity emerges in my interviews. For example, the gendered hierarchy Winer Gyal #1 describes in her interview between her grandmother and mother occurs as a counter narrative to patriarchy. Growing up under the guidance of a strict grandmother influenced her aspirations and self-determination as a woman. And while education and family were prioritized, Winer Gyal#1 admits to a kind of racial ambivalence, where she was mostly unaware of being a Black woman until she was about 21 or 22 years old. Until the time of migration, she was “just” somebody’s grand/daughter. Even with this gendered and familial reduction, she takes (and took) seriously the responsibility of leading by example for her younger siblings as the first-born female in her family, particularly by excelling in education. Many of her reflections implicate the stern upbringing with her grandmother³⁷ who was, to her, a visionary Black woman, a strict disciplinarian, and someone who imparted the significance of a good education as being part of the strategy to success.

³⁷ On December 2nd, 2021, Winer Gyal #1’s grandmother died in Trinidad. It was her plan to try to get to Trinidad for Christmas in 2021 to visit her to celebrate her over 100 years of life. Unfortunately, due to Covid, this was not possible. I wanted to note this loss out of respect for her and her special bond with her grandmother.

Ironically, Winer Gyal #1's father vociferously objected to the perceived scandal of her plan to migrate with her boyfriend (e.g., "what would people say?") and even suggested her plan was doomed to fail. This defiance of patriarchal power relations and boundary crossing speaks to the dynamic influence of the matriarch in Trinidadian family units. In spite of her father's objection, she remained firm in her plan to migrate and pursue her education. She mentions that, in times of crisis and worry, she turns to her mother and grandmother to pray for her and the success of her travails. The latter point also stresses how day-to-day relational influences occur through gender relations and family bonds.

The issue of becoming a racialized phenotype appears in my conversation with Symone, who bemoans the sense of forced assimilation that is required by U.S. Black categorizations (Celeste, 2017). For instance, she is forced to confront being "Black" in the U.S. when she has to fill out any form that asks her to choose "Black or African American." She is "offended" by the compulsory classification and prefers to be "other" versus an imposed categorization. She says, "I am Black. I am Trinidadian. Where is my box? Nowhere" (p. 110). Much like Nattie Girl and Winer Gyal #1, Symone shares that, in America, she is only seen as Black, because no one will know by "just seeing" her that she is Trinidadian. She emphasizes this cultural incongruity as a dimension of U.S. blackness by saying, "all they gonna see is this Black skin and that is all they will care about" (p. 110). In this context, "they" refers to white Americans.

Aware of the salience of her Black female identity, Symone retells a story of unbelonging from when she was an undergraduate student living in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of Hialeah in Miami, Florida. She embodies her irritation in this memory by recapturing the details of being ignored by her neighbors who were primarily Hispanic. She carefully notes the irony involved with her great grandmother being Venezuelan while she was being rejected by a

Hispanic community. This critique reminds us that we cannot ever know a person's culture by just seeing them and we ought to be cautious about making assumptions that are shaped by dominant ideologies. Celeste (2017) addresses similar issues of stigmatized blackness by examining the discordant media representations of Cuban and Haitian realities in terms of "belonging" and "legitimacy" (p. 21). By analyzing how these two ethnic and cultural groups are positioned in relation to each other, she also investigates the interplay of power in identifying, shaping, and reinforcing difference. To this end, Symone's lived experience expands how we understand the way(s) in which difference is shaped and reinforced for another group of Black im/migrant women.

It is fitting to invoke Marable and Jones' (2008) discussion of transnational blackness as a "social site for resistance" in response to Celeste's (2017) research and Symone's articulation of living with race in the U.S. The latter issue leads me to think of how identity is constructed and negotiated relationally and, moreover, how these transnational women come to recognize the "common issues transcending boundaries" (Marable & Jones, 2008, p. 15). The urgency of transnational blackness lies in "challenging the legitimacy and power of the global color line and its oppressive political economies of inequality" (p. 6). Therefore, we need to explore not only how we learn to live race, but also the relevance and consequences of the (white) patriarchy.

The patriarchy is very much connected to political movements and practices throughout the world, to include Trinidad. For example, Kwame Ture (born Stokely Carmichael) was a Trinidadian-American civil rights activist who became a significant part of the global Pan-African movement, and the Black Power movement in the United States. To this end, it is, to me, unsurprising that Ertha Violet aligns with her father's political stance. She feels grounded in a Black identity through the global Black diasporic struggles and Black political movements

because of her father’s beliefs and civic participation in Trinidad. Her mother was more concerned with religion than politics and, therefore, did not play as significant a role in shaping her understanding of a Black identity.

Regardless of her parental influences, at that time, Ertha Violet still didn’t “think” of herself as a Black girl, in part, because of the racialized and ethnic diversity comprising her family. Perhaps the racial and ethnic diversity within her family was a taken-for-granted aspect of her day-to-day existence in Trinidad, so that she did not feel pressured to self-identify as “Black” or “other.” Although she is aware of racialized differences in her family, these differences did not prompt for her any kind of self-identification. In fact, she feels that this “particular identification” (i.e., Black identity) did not occur until her migration to the U.S. where she still primarily identified as being “Trinidadian, a Trinbagonian” (p. 104). No matter how she thought of herself, part of her culture shock is related to how other students at her middle school presumed her Black identity. Their assumptions stimulated internalized confusion and dissonance about what it means/meant to be a Black girl in America. She also discussed how she felt “othered,” noting that she was a Permanent Resident at that time—“a foreigner, not American...lumped in with all the other Black kids to include Black American kids” (p. 102). Undoubtedly, she felt alienated by the ways others ascribed her identity.

Education became the path to self-validation for Ertha Violet. It would be years after leaving Trinidad, while pursuing her graduate studies that she began to contemplate her identity as a Black woman, a Trinidadian, and an American. Only through the help of her mentor, Dr. Carol Boyce Davies, the Trinidadian scholar whom she exalts as a being “brilliant, powerful Trinidadian woman” (p. 104), did she begin to locate points of connectedness with her own blackness as a Caribbean person, which, in turn, led her to re-evaluate her identity. For her as a

Black and Caribbean feminist, being mentored by Dr. Carole Boyce Davies (whom I cite extensively in this dissertation), Drs. Keyshia Abraham and Meredith Gatsby helped her “to feel comfortable decentering whiteness” in her daily life because they “challenged me and noticed me, *me*” (p. 104). She felt recognized and affirmed relationally, which, in turn, bolstered her self-esteem. However, those feelings were later complicated during the era of Trumpism. During this time, she “would be made to feel very uncomfortable by both Black and white Americans” (p. 112) as a Black person who embodies im/migrant cultural performances by speaking with an accent. This kind of xenophobic sentiment by others toward her is shared with Winer Gyal #1’s lived experience in the workplace in which both Black Americans and white Americans question her credentials to evaluate and diminish her qualifications as an occupational therapist based on her perceived foreignness. Talia Esnard and Deirdre Cobb-Roberts (2018) address this kind of discrimination in academic spaces to examine how power is exacted and the way messages about being out of place are communicated.

Black feminist thought promotes “strategies of everyday resistance” to systems of oppression (Collins, 1989, p. 745). The women in my study innovate daily strategies to navigate everyday interactions because of how their racialized, gendered bodies and accents mark their difference in non-Caribbean spaces. These life skill strategies aim to ensure their survival as they simultaneously try to locate spaces of belonging. Fed up of the divisiveness, Ertha Violet acknowledges how systemic racism has disadvantaged Black women in America. She shares her own frustration with the kinds of material realities that accompany these experiences. She admits that, although she is aware how *some* African Americans view Caribbean people, she believes that her “responsibility entails not perpetuating stereotypes against African American women or Black American women” (p. 138). She expresses a proclivity toward coalition-building versus

the perpetuation of difference. Additionally, it is these urgent feelings of tensions and disidentifications that intensified the longing to share her struggle about her identity. Ertha Violet admits, she has been waiting for a long time to see if other Black, Trinidadian American women were also struggling to make a way.

Ertha Violet's yearning to share her struggle with others is significant in additional ways. First, it speaks to the ways in which Caribbean women have been conditioned to suffer in silence within patriarchy, by performing the stereotypical role of the non-complaining, strong, Black woman (see Collins, 2004). Second, the longing stresses how Black Trinidadian women typically suffer in silence when confronting varying oppressions such as racism or fiscal precarity in migration experiences. These silences represent an absence in the stories that are told about Black, Trinidadian women who migrate to the U.S. In my own stories, I speak of the silences I endured and the secret keeping I was made to enact both before and after I migrated. Complicating these family and migration secrets are several additional embodied experiences of precarity with respect to food insecurity, economic fallibility, and work instability. In Trinidadian culture, women are typically taught to manage our suffering and not to speak openly about it. As "proper" young women, we learn how to keep our mouths shut and remain hypervigilant with care and caution to never bring shame to our families. To maintain images of perfectionism, Caribbean families often tell their children to keep their family business "inside the house," so-to-speak. In this way, no matter the gravity or severity of a situation, telling is forbidden and secrecy is prized as a badge of family honor.

Carole Boyce Davies (1995) explains that silence does not mean "not having anything to say, "but rather it means the "inability of oppressors to hear" (p. 3). Thus, by maintaining the culture of silence and secrecy, it becomes challenging to tell our/their stories, to have our stories

be heard, and, even more, to be heard as important and transformational in constructing a new language of emancipation (Davies, 1995; Lorde, 1984b; Marable & Jones, 2008). To enact such transformational liberatory practices, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states that we must persist in acknowledging Black women's dis/empowerment because to remap the journey we must learn how to move from "silence to language" (p. 132). Only when we break these silences we learn to "teach by living and speaking those truths" (Lorde, 1984c, p. 43) which are crucial to our survival.

Self-definition is one way to enact such movement as affirmation and empowerment (Collins, 2000). For example, Ertha Violet speaks to an acute desire to create a space in which she can freely express how she defines herself. She admits to feeling "guilty" of trying to make herself "palpable to be accepted in certain spaces" (p. 104). Merely living is insufficient and to manage feeling "stuck, frustrated [and] dispirited" during the pandemic she turned to sewing which ignited "excitement and passion" within her (p. 139). In spite of it all, she and her family are "trying to be happy in the moment [because] All we have is right now" (p. 139). She believes that, if she felt safe in her everyday life to share her experiences, she could garner support from other women to devise creative strategies of coping and survival. Moreover, she shares her stories to ignite a dialogue that she hopes creates the conditions for community building, knowledge sharing and resisting oppressions.

This imperative to have her voice heard and listened to, and for her to be seen as a credible source of knowledge, becomes a form of resistance. In doing so, she (and Black women like her) enforce a contrapuntal to the "most negative and uninformed representations of ideas concerning black women's history and women's empowerment" (Davies, 1995, p. 6) by reclaiming ownership over their identities and attaining agency. Thus, by challenging

representational deafness, these Black women assert more than a “mere articulation of a presence to significant/creative/informed speech” (Davies, 1995, p. 9). To talk back to oppressors, as bell hooks (1989) would suggest, means that we are assertively transgressing the “boundaries and locations for Black women within the context of societal authorities and norms” (Davies, 1995, p. 8). The telling of these stories are powerful affirmations of truth telling achievable by boundary crossing.

Telling their stories and asserting their identity has been a productive strategy to deter from becoming assimilated into U.S. blackness (see Celeste, 2017; Collins, 2000; Marable & Jones, 2008). By asserting our national identity in ways that also works to maintain our cultural and racial distinctiveness, we raise our voices in defense of being Trinidadian and American. In these ways, nationality emerges as a dominant identity—an ethnic signifier of difference—within the intersections of race, gender and class that complicates im/migrant experiences and lived realities.

Identity Negotiation

In Chapter Two, I shared several instances in which I acknowledge my own hesitation to self-identify a “critical Black consciousness.” I couldn’t recognize how easily I had been assimilated into U.S. Blackness, even though I had not engaged, accepted, and elaborated on this newly ascribed identification. In the following section, I further address the complexity of identity negotiation for Black Trinidadian[-]American women.

As I described in Chapter One, identity negotiation entails shifting one’s worldview or behaviors to adapt to, or assimilate within, a dominant culture (see Durham, 2020; Jackson, 2002; McClaurin, 2001; Mc Ferguson, 2020). Many times during this process, cultural others

find ourselves in an in-between space (Bhabha, 1994). This space is a site of complex navigation conditioned by the intersecting power dynamics that constitute cultural lives (Diversi & Moreira, 2018). It is a space of relational tension for Trinidadian transnationals who are challenged to adopt a both/and approach (see Baxter, 2004; Bhabha, 1994) to life here in the U.S., and memories of a life once lived in Trinidad. We all arrived to the U.S. with lived experience that privileges a Trinidadian vantage point. Thus, the tensions associated with adapting make relating an uncertain process of becoming while simultaneously unbelonging. These opposing constructs of living between both “here and there” are deemed essential, and even, valuable (Orbe, 2008). Furthermore, these opposing constructs help make sense of how these tensions of here and there, of absence-presence, are in negotiation as a site of both conflict and (inter)connection.

Negotiating Embodied Difference

My interviews stress the ways in which Trinidadian, transnational women are vested in preserving our own ethnic and cultural distinctions from U.S. born Black Americans and African Americans by prioritizing a strong, national identity. Stuart Hall (2017) writes that his identity was formed as much by what his “circumstances” had created in him than by “the often unrecognized or unconscious struggle” against his own “conditions of formation” (p. 22). He names colonialism as the thing that “got” him to think about who he was, and further explains the way his parents helped him form his identity. Such influences instilled in him that he must learn to “rebel, resist against, repress, forget or even learn to ‘speak’” (p. 22) in order to form our own identities as post-colonial subjects. One of the primary sources of angst for the women with whom I am in conversation for the dissertation is related to the assumed racialized assimilation of Black Trinidadians into Black American culture. What Hall is asking us to do is to interrogate

racial formation to ascertain how the conditions of living with marginalized, raced, and gendered identities in the U.S. force us to think about how we interpret our identities as Black Trinidadian [-]American women in diaspora.

The issue of assumed racial assimilation is magnified largely due to a lack of understanding ourselves as post-colonial subjects, and the construction of the socio-historical weight of difference and the discourse of race (Hall, 2018). Stuart Hall (2018) explains:

race is a discourse; that it operates like a language, like a sliding signifier; that its signifiers reference not genetically established facts but the systems of meaning that have come to be fixed in the classifications of culture; and that those meanings have real effects not because of some truth that inheres in their scientific classification but because of the will to power and the regime of truth that are instituted in the shifting relations of discourse that such meanings establish without concepts and ideas in the signifying field. (pp. 45-46)

To operationalize race as a “sliding signifier” suggests that, in addition to race being a social construction, it is also a specific form of *classifying* cultural difference. This discourse of race extends into what Hall (2018) describes as “discursive practices,” which could suggest that for these Black Trinidadian women, discussions of, practices of and representations of Black American people in the U.S. conflict with who we understand ourselves to be as Black Trinidadian[-]American women living in the U.S.

It is reasonable to believe that Trinidadians have been subject to racism long before we had a critical awareness of what it does in our own (Caribbean) history. As I described in Chapter Two, I was a victim of a colonial education that had been so normalized that I couldn't even recognize the absence of Black scholars until I began university in the U.S. Like many of

the women whom I interviewed, I took for granted the privilege of owning a passport, the economic advantage of being able to afford international travel, and the ability to qualify for visas which was not accessible to all Trinidadians. Thus, although there might very well be “different racisms” (see Davies, 2013; Hall, 2018), all racisms “can be properly understood as a product of historical relations” (Hall, 1980, p. 337). Indeed, just because our lived experience with racism didn’t look like Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor or George Floyd, that does not mean that we were not victims of, and subjected to versions of, racism through hierarchical class and color stratification systems (Davies, 2013; Hall, 2017; Orbe & Harris, 2013), including those experiences with racism that comprise our ongoing everyday lives.

Therefore, for this group of women the use of nationality becomes a daily coping mechanism, a strategic form of navigating discrimination. Nationality, therefore, serves to interject degrees of difference (e.g., the use of language, dialect, accents, ethnicity) as a meaningful way to maintain ties to, and locate similarities within, their culture. Perhaps the idea of being assimilated into African American culture sparks an unspoken fear of a kind of erasure of their/our own histories. It could also mean that Black people who migrate to the U.S. reserve the right to choose their self-identification in ways that may contest the existing classification systems (e.g., “Black” or “African American”). To be “Black” would be to include those of us from the Caribbean into the Black racial umbrella of American blackness. Additionally, the classification of “African American” situates U.S. American Blackness as an undeviating racial and ethnic identity that historically includes a range of Black communities (Celeste, 2017). The need to establish such cultural difference is, for me, not meant to be a judgement about African American or other U.S Black cultures, but rather an assertion of cultural difference as deserving of its own recognition.

**Surviving At The Margins:
Transnational Blackness, Power and Privilege**

What does it mean to travel across national borders as Black women completely unaware of how your blackness travels? What does it mean to live as a diasporic, as Stuart Hall (2017) suggests, and evade the proposed homogeneity of both Black and white Americanness? Why do Black women from Trinidad struggle to find our place in and among U.S. blackness even as contributing American citizens? As described in Chapter 1, Manoucheka Celeste (2017) uses the term “transnational blackness” (p. 3) to explore the limits of how blackness travels across national boundaries. As she rightly explains, the experience of blackness is not a monolith. Her position aligns well with Stuart Hall’s (2017) understanding of diasporic identity as being fluid, dynamic and sometimes, adversarial.

The experience of blackness has been complicated by nationality, gender, and class and, in some cases, a double framing of what it means to be an “outsider.” To be an outsider in this context is to be Black *and* a Black im/migrant woman from Trinidad. Even with a U.S. citizenship, the feeling of being an outsider is not easily shaken. Such feelings are often magnified by American attitudes to im/migrants, which effectively create aesthetic boundaries in both living and workspaces (Matthews, 2013). In addition, because the Black Trinidadian women I interviewed see themselves as participating in civic processes (voting) and the U.S. economy (through employment and paying taxes), they believe they should be recognized as individuals and respected for their dynamic role as citizens of the country which is not always necessarily the case. Although these women over time have been challenged by issues of race, gender and economic status, they actively seek out social networks (e.g., family, friends, church, cultural associations) to help them navigate gnarly, unfamiliar adaptive spaces (Matthews, 2013).

These social networks contribute to the ways in which these naturalized im/migrant women understand belonging as a social citizenship. Celeste (2017) explores issues of race, representation and immigration on social citizenship, which informs the issue of belonging that is not guaranteed by a legal citizenship. The issue of a social citizenship centers much of how these Black, Trinidadian[-]American women come to understand their lives and communities in the U.S. How could these women who were born and raised in Trinidad come to understand their identities as Americans living in the U.S? What does it mean, as C.L.R. James (2013) would suggest, to be in and not of America?³⁸ These stories speak to a kind of exile as we each tried to understand the narrative of transnational blackness in the U.S. into which we were placed, even before the moment we became citizens. The added import of exclusion situates the affect of im/migration processes as unbelonging.

Social Citizenship: The (Un)Naturalization Process of (Un)Belonging

All of my participants are naturalized American citizens. We were all born in Trinidad and differently subjected to the process of becoming American citizens. For Nattie Girl and Ertha Violet, this was a prepared process so that their arrival into the U.S. already granted them a legal status as a Permanent Resident. For Winer Gyal #1 and Symone, naturalization eventually occurred via marriage after first being an international student and later a Permanent Resident. Over time, Bernadette received her Permanent Resident sponsorship from her mother who was a legal resident of the U.S. Nevertheless, eventually, all of these women became U.S citizens. Their stories demonstrate the pride they took for what their newly acquired status could allow

³⁸ Stuart Hall (2017) in "Familiar Stranger" writes, "As the great Trinidadian, C.L.R. James once said of Caribbean migrants to the UK, we are 'in, but not of, Europe'" (p. 11). I join with Hall's use of C.L.R. James' phrasing by repositing the statement as a question in a U.S. migration context.

them to do. For some this meant the ability to live comfortably through gainful employment and to advance career ambitions. For others it meant taking advantage of the ability to travel freely across borders with the access and cultural capital of a U.S. passport. In all cases, it meant the women could participate in civic processes while trying to build meaningful, productive lives while living in the U.S.

Having a U.S. citizenship allowed all of us to be more at ease and to live with a peace of mind. This calm was only possible once the ability to legally work and reside in the U.S. could no longer be challenged. Having a legal citizenship allowed Winer Gyal #1 to release all the burden that came with hoarding ominous secrets. While living with a vulnerable legal status, Winer Gyal #1 committed to a self-imposed invisibility until her permanent residency was solidified. Just this once, this level invisibility was desirable and welcome to shield her from visibility as she navigated the legalities of attaining citizenship. As a U.S. citizen Winer Gyal #1 has been able to elevate her social status by loudly pursuing her career ambitions post-naturalization. Winer Gyal #1's story thickens the layers of complexity of her lived experience by expressing her investments not just in her life but also in the future of their children who are born Americans.

The ways in which I construct citizenship in this dissertation recognize the legal (political citizenship) but primarily emphasizes the affective and social citizenship as the struggle for social belonging and the embodied weight of such unbelonging. Again, a social citizenship emphasizes belonging, the participation in the social life of a place, and recognition by community members (Celeste, 2017; Glenn, 2011). In this sense, a social citizenship is lived in multiple spaces (e.g., work or community) in the host country. Aranda et al. (2014) describe the way im/migrants commonly try to recreate aspects of their native homes by “engaging in

habitual practices and attitudes...based on cultural understandings or practices” (p. 31). As Trinidadians living in the U.S., the women and I feel most comfortable and “at home” when engaging in activities with and among other Caribbean people, including other Trinidadians. In all cases, the women found ways to maintain ties to Trinidadian culture through music, food, and festivals, such as Carnival celebrations (e.g., the West Indian Day Parade and Miami Carnival). For instance, Winer Gyal #1’s strongest link to social belonging is reinforced through family holiday traditions such as pastelle making around Christmas. Undoubtedly, ritual performances are part of their meaning-making, which helps to make their transnational presence in the U.S. more homelike and, thus, more tolerable.

Each of us legally became American citizens through the naturalization process. A legal citizenship means we can all be counted as Americans who can participate in civic process and all the legal rights such a citizenship affords. Yet, living in the U.S. as a foreign-born person with a raced identity did not, and it does not, guarantee acceptance in the dominant culture as part of a *substantive citizenship* (Marshall, 1950). This issue further enhances the tension between assimilation and respect for cultural difference (Rosaldo, 1994). As Glenn (2011) carefully observes, “we should be attentive to the difference between having rights in theory and being able to exercise rights in practice” (p. 3). Although my participants were granted a legal citizenship which provided access to theoretical rights (e.g., civil, and political processes), the process of acceptance and recognition in broader spaces was significantly more complicated by issues of race, nationality, and gender.

The relationship between the intersectional axes of race, nationality, and gender also includes a class dimension as inherent to their understanding and positionality in U.S. society. All of the women I interviewed had earned at least one college degree (e.g., Bachelor’s Degree)

which they attained while living in the U.S. While their racialized class status supports idealized notions of citizenship performances for minoritized bodies (e.g., employment, taxpayers, home ownership), there have also been unmistakable and deliberate failures by other U.S. citizens (both Black and white) to accept or recognize them as equally deserving Americans. Winer Gyal #1, Nattie Girl, Symone and Ertha Violet all express this sentiment particularly regarding workplace behaviors.

What might such encounters tell us about the affect of citizenship on the foreign born? What does the pursuit of citizenship do to a Black Trinidadian[-]American woman's im/migrant body? As the stories show, there are real and consequential feelings of frustration, disenchantment, disappointment, discomfort, and fear, even *after* we became citizens. For instance, Bernadette disclosed that in 2020 "the bulb just kind of went out ... to confront the reality of how we, as Black people are looked at in this country. And I am a citizen" (p. 134). This sociopolitical and historical reference refers to the repeated attempts by the Republican Party to disenfranchise Black people by attempting to dispose of their votes which helped President Joe Biden win the election in 2020. This demoralizing experience reminded Bernadette of her hyper(in)visibility as a Black person and, in another sense, her invisibility as a person who contributes to the productivity of a society.

Americans do not explain themselves or their origins to Black people and yet, this is a popular form of denigrating and exoticizing Caribbean im/migrants (see Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). For instance, Winer Gyal #1 says that she "resents" having to explain herself as "a Trinidadian living in America" and reiterates that she feels as though, relationally speaking, she is "always under a microscope" (p. 110). She continues by saying, "I am a foreigner to them. As a Black woman, I am fed up" (p. 110). As a "foreigner," she indicates the ways she is made to

feel like an unwelcomed stranger and that the issue of anti-blackness in the U.S. continues, at the very least, to unsettle her peace of mind. Ertha Violet also feels a similar tension as a form of “othering.” She observes that white Americans view successful Black persons as “the anomaly,” which to her, reinforces notions of exceptionalism. Her concerns transcend the present to the future as she wrestles with how to prepare her children to deal with racism in America. Her struggle mounts as she states:

[T]here’s this feeling of ostracizing or blocking people of color from being seen and heard by white people. I’ve tried to express this idea to my white counterparts, particularly white women with whom I’ve worked all to no avail. You cannot assume that someone is not as smart as you simply because they’re struggling to find a word or don’t enunciate in the same manner as you. It is incredibly frustrating! (p. 115).

The communicative misnaming of national identity is also emotionally taxing for Winer Gyal #1. Even when the question might be well intended to make polite or interesting conversation, when asked where they are from, to say “Trinidad” often meets with questions about Jamaica. Winer Gyal#1 recalls being asked to locate for someone “where in Jamaica” Trinidad is located. Perhaps this kind of essentializing of Caribbean cultures by Americans can aid understandings of being a Black person in U.S. contexts. People may not know exactly where you are from. They might not know the kinds of experiences you’ve had prior to meeting you. What makes sense, however, is to ask about their /our lives instead of making vapid assumptions about who they/we are. After all, when racist, essentializing behavior is repeated by Americans it begins to erode the soul of a people. Such vocalizations of difference, as a form of nationality-based stereotyping, reminds us that we are foreigners to this country who do not fit in.

The women in my study are naturalized American citizens unwittingly lodged between the nation and community boundaries, as well as the histories of race and racism in America. I wonder about the kind of necessary work that needs to be done to set aside the borders formed by “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2005) related to difference. I wonder what it will take to meaningfully and justly work through our cultural differences and perhaps even learn something about each other.

Yet, naming our differences is not enough. Knowing each other’s histories is, indeed, a path on which to move forward. However, it is still insufficient. We have all experienced varying levels of oppression as Black women living in the U.S., but the degree of struggle in these oppressions can become divisive and foster distrust (Greer, 2013). Ertha Violet explains that because she has been made “to feel very uncomfortable by both Black and white Americans” she would “code switch to fit in” and “try to speak the way they speak to be accepted, included, understood, and respected” (p. 112). She believes it to be “unfair” and resigns “that’s just the way it is.” Further, because Trinidadian women were not taught to view race in the same way as native-born Black Americans (see Vickerman, 1999), we are sometimes perceived to be in disunion with Black struggles. This perception is often untrue. It is crucial to recognize how these felt, flesh-to-flesh experiences demonstrate the “physical realities” and affective realities of these women’s lives as part of a “politics born out of necessity” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 23). The necessity in this context is the need to feel safe and to move beyond mere survival and instead toward stability, success, and prosperity. Nonetheless, for Winer Gyal #1, Symone and me, the deliberate work required to legally participate in the U.S. as citizens meant for us then, that we were forced to adopt a very individualistic approach to survival based on an indisputable, legal differentiation.

The decision to leave one's homeland comes with great sacrifice. In addition to experiencing the separation and dislocation from the geographical place, the migration process usually disrupts family and friendship networks. This increases the need to grapple with, and try to overcome, resolute uncertainty and indefatigable precarity upon arrival in our new destinations. Part of this precarity is related to a lack of knowledge regarding U.S. Blackness and, more specifically, Black American experiences. Additionally, the women I interviewed even admitted to hearing stereotypical narratives about Black Americans as being "lazy" and "unambitious" and used these traveling narratives as reasons to maintain differentiations between being Trinidadian and Black American. While they all admitted that they do not identify as "African American" or "Black American," it is important to note that their affirmation of being Trinidadian has more to do with paying homage to homeland than any kind of in-group racial discrimination.

According to Stuart Hall (2017), the experience of the Caribbean transnational is often limited by a misunderstanding of imperialism and colonization. Hall (2017) expresses his disdain about Caribbean people's knowledges of the "wider world" marked by colonialism and imperialism because he deems the limitations to be "narrow, distorted, and often misguided" (p. 145). His position is echoed by all of my participants who admit they didn't really understand the Black American experience until their migration to the U.S. Consequently, they felt their difference among other Blacks in the U.S. who reminded them that they are not native to the country.

To compensate for feeling like outsiders, my participants speak about relying on the salience of their national identity as Trinidadians to build community. Additionally, they purposefully engage in activities in Caribbean cultural spaces to diminish feelings of

strange(r)ness. To the differences between Black women in England and the U.S., Audre Lorde (2015) asks the following poignant questions: “What are our differences? What are the ways in which we do not see each other? How can we operate together better as a unified front?” (p. 77). This leads me to ask: *what* does it mean to see each other across difference and *how* can we participate in building coalitions?

For many of the women I interviewed, navigating interactions with embodied difference is a daily relational reality. At a time when “diversity” and “inclusion” have become trendy buzz words in American society, they note how their difference was not only marked, but also reinforced by intolerance, and, especially in workspaces, unbelonging. In the following section I discuss the struggles of being Trinidadian[-]American.

Accents: Sounding Off On Transnational Precarity

Marked by Difference: “Where are you from? I hear an Accent.”

“The stranger” social construction dis-places foreign born Trinidadian women who are American citizens as outsiders and peripheral grazers who are out of place (Ahmed, 2000; Anderson, 1983; Celeste, 2017; Matthews, 2013). To be out of place and enclosed by such obscure borderlines of strange(r)ness (Ahmed, 2000; Anzaldúa, 1987) means that these foreign bodies became hyper-visible to native-born Americans. In this sense, to naturalized citizens, all native-born Americans are the strangers—even those who are similarly raced, gendered, and classed. All the women I interviewed disclosed that their Americanness was challenged by native-born Americans because of their Trinidadian accents, a way of relating that felt familiar to my own lived experience.

The issue of workplace communication and its affect on Caribbean im/migrants is an important aspect of these women's day to day realities. Bridgewater and Buzzanell (2010) explore the complexity of communication among Caribbean immigrants by using im/migrant storytelling as a "discursive positioning" of "cultural formation and linguistic construction" (p. 237). One of the participants in the study, a Trinidadian woman named Christine, disclosed that, in spite of her academic credentials, she was not considered for many positions because they recognized her as being of "Caribbean descent" (p. 250). Later, the same participant, Christine, speaks to experiencing racism in the workplace when she wore her hair as an Afro for the first time and was subsequently told by her employer that the "relationship wasn't working" (p. 248). Recognizing how her blackness and cultural difference was perceived in her workplace, Christine resolved to maintaining "straight hair" (p. 250) to fit into the confines of respectability for corporate America. These kinds of involuntary compromises reflect some of the experiences of my participants about their Trinidadian accents.

Ertha Violet expresses her own rage and a felt sense of hopelessness about having to police herself in the workplace. Although she is proud of her accent and heritage as a Trinidadian, she is angry, disappointed, and disgusted that she must defend herself as also being American. Symone has learned to adapt a more playful response in her customer service position and is flippant when callers question her accent. By underscoring the prevalence of U.S. regionality, she reclaims her power by reminding Americans that she also hears an "accent" from *them*. Also, in some cases when challenged by irate (and possibly xenophobic callers) to produce an "American" with whom they can talk, she happily announces she is "American." These piercing daily interactions are ingeminate reminders of difference by "authentically" sounding

Americans. Such protest by “authentic” Americans who refuse to speak with someone who doesn’t “sound” American reiterate the idea that (native-born) Americans do not sound like her.

Winer Gyal #1 speaks to this issue of difference framed as “American authenticity” when others challenge her about her credentials as a physical therapist who is also a Black woman who speaks with a foreign sounding accent. She further explains her exasperation and resentment at having to justify herself to both Black Americans and white Americans. Nattie Girl defends her position among Black, economically disadvantaged American women who in her experience believe that people who come from the Caribbean to the U.S. have already “fallen” in life and, therefore, are beneath their lower-class status, in a secondary societal positioning. Each of these women express how they are subject to power and control in their workspaces because their accents define their difference which subsequently fortifies their felt sense of precarity and unbelonging.

The felt sense of discord also persists in educational institutions. For instance, Bernadette recalls being laughed at as an international student because of her accent in a speech class while she attended University in New York City. This indiscrete moment resonates with one episodic account in Woodruffe (2021), where I explain how my accent became a source of disturbance for a white official at a speech and debate tournament. In short, our identities as im/migrant women to the U.S. typically rests on the recognition from other foreign-born Americans and not from native-born Americans. To move from margin to center (hooks, 2000), Trinidadian transnational women usually strive to locate community among each other. This effort largely involves trying to challenge dominant negative assumptions about im/migrants like us to help impact change and create new relational ontologies about im/migrant lives.

A relational approach to communication helps us to better understand Trinidadian women as individuals, and as part of a collective group of people (Collier, 1991) who are both Trinidadians and Americans. The conflict that most often appears relates to when the need to be seen as American dwells in tension with the need to be recognized as also being Trinidadian. As I mentioned above, Symone and Winer Gyal #1 express their perturbation with legal forms that demand self-identification as “Black or African American.” In this space, the legal form of exclusion reinforces sentiments of unbelonging prior to participation in any process—legal or social. In Trinidad there is no need to self-identify as any race/ethnicity on any employment application form. Other aspects of identification (e.g., sex/gender, date of birth, nationality) are required to validate someone’s legal ability to work, but there is no space for race/ethnic classifications. Thus, these legal problem spaces reiterate how feelings of unbelonging can be perpetuated in different places.

Interestingly, Ertha Violet mentioned favorable points of identification with the Caribbean-American community in Miami (which includes Haitians, Dominicans, and Cubans), unlike Symone who felt ostracized by the Hispanic community in that same geographical location. In her work place, specifically during the Donald J. Trump administration, Ertha Violet struggles with her Trinidadian identity and feels pressured to perform in ways that minimized her Trinidadianess to make her sound more “authentically” American. She believes that white Americans value these Black ethnic distinctions and her feigned performances of American authenticity debilitate her spirit, although they contribute to a “shifting” margin of her own “cultural displacement” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 31).

This moment serves to stress and underscore the ways in which balancing a national identity with a racialized identity, for these Trinidadian transnationals, has proven to be

exhausting and, at times, disheartening and disillusioning. In Trinidad, this balancing act was unnecessary. We/they were able to just be and live as we/they are without self-policing within the confines of what others think we/they should be. The weight of assimilation—being perceived as authentically American—fuses with the legal stipulation of self-identifying as being Black or African American. And, with each layered classifying condition, the burden of disidentification festers and drains the resolve of its bearer. And yet, in spite of these burdens, we/they continue to make a way.

The problem of legally required forms of classification connects well with the work of Cristina Greer (2013) whose study on the importance of Black citizens and im/migrants to the American political system infers a duality and conflict in terms of how one “becomes black” (p. 37). Greer states that this racialized becoming occurs “both from the perspective of the individual and also from the person who perceives the individual based on descriptive characteristics” (p. 37). More importantly, Greer makes the point that there is no “assumption” that all Blacks—regardless of their origins—will negotiate with race and ethnicity in the same or similar ways in the U.S. This idea is validated by the above idea that Symone felt she was snubbed by the Latin/x community in Miami, whereas Ertha Violet found the same racially and ethnically diverse community of people be familiar and welcoming.

Trying to fit into the culture of another country is fatiguing and for that reason my participants seek and invest time and energy in carving out Caribbean spaces that exist outside of Trinidad (Davies, 2013). Part of this move relies on owning being “diasporic”—an expression Stuart Hall (2017) prefers over the use of the term “identity” (p. 144).³⁹ He believes the term

³⁹ Although I use the “identity” throughout the dissertation, I also value and embrace the depth of Stuart Hall’s use of the term diasporic to describe the transnational im/migration experience in terms of being connected to shared histories, culture, language, and homeland.

identity is limiting because being diasporic “challenges the idea of whole, integral, traditionally unchanging cultural identities. No identities survive the diasporic process intact and unchanged” (p. 144). Therefore, to be diasporic is to embrace our “multiple belongings” as part of a complex, cultural fusion (Hall, 2017, p. 144). As the stories show, being both Trinidadian and American places them within this tension of multiple belongings, which, in turn, challenges how they come into knowing and being in the U.S.

Transnational Black Women’s Precarity

For at least three of my participants managing uncertainty has been a core aspect in their survival strategies. For instance, Winer Gyal #1 repeatedly articulates moments of precarity and liminality while waiting for her Green Card approval, but insists that she could not let fear captivate her and she needed to “push.” Similar ideas are expressed by Symone who, after a major health setback and being rejected by the U.S. embassy in her petition for a new student visa, felt that she had to at least “try” to do something to secure her future. After her father’s tragic death in Trinidad, Bernadette was challenged to reevaluate everything about her life to that point, and she opted to (re)create a life in the U.S. Ertha Violet chose humility and peace-keeping in her workspaces to ensure that she did not jeopardize her employment, which was crucial to her family’s survival. In each of these cases, the struggle has been in their willingness and desire to move through difficult situations to build, create and enjoy a life that is not dictated by survival as a pathway to more promising futures for themselves and their families.

Navigating a Culture of (Un)Belonging

Culture is constituted and through and locatable within communication which situates culture in part, as an ongoing struggle for meaning (Berry, 2021; 2016; Durham, 2014; Montgomery, 1993; Ono, 1998). One prevalent struggle for meaning shows in the discomfort my participants felt about their (un)belonging in American society. Nonetheless, these feelings of unbelonging did not signal a willingness to disengage with Americans writ large. After paying, in some cases, hundreds of dollars to legally become an American citizen, and abiding by the laws of civic engagement, the hope is that we would be more easily accepted as Americans regardless of where we were born. Also, although this might have been the hope, the very act of holding onto ideas of home/land demands a stratified national identity that, once again, pegs a discursive tension of “them versus us” (see Diversi & Moreira, 2018).

Securing a legal citizenship is the perceived pathway to a social citizenship. There is an unspoken expectation that when im/migrants arrive to the U.S. we will assimilate and acculturate into the dominant culture (Berry, 2005) in ways that lead us over time to necessarily become more American and less Trinidadian. The implication of this expectation is that one citizenship effectively disavows the other, which is simply untrue. To this end, De La Garza and Ono (2015) reiterate that although adaption is the perceived ideal, many im/migrants resist adaptation and do not try to become “cultural insiders” (p. 274). In the same article, the authors suggest that im/migrants defy “traditional adaptation theories” (p. 274) in favor of preserving their own cultural identities that better serve their individual needs in the host country. The idea of a “differential adaptation” (p. 275) is provocative because it begins to ask what the host country (i.e., the U.S.) can learn from those who migrate. This theory not only recognizes the interplay of power, privilege and a range of experience, it also specifically means that how im/migrants adapt

“will differ in relation to the ways that agency, power, and discourse structure their experience” (p. 276). I can’t help but contemplate the possibilities of differential adaptation performances for the women with whom I am in conversation in this study. How might such resistance and reimagining construct alternative futures?

None of us can shed being Trinidadian, any more than we can instantly become American. We don’t simply become someone else’s culture, traditions, language, and practices, simply because we are geographically located there. We arrive in the U.S. with our own culture, traditions, language and practices and the struggle entails holding onto our self-expressions in our present-day engagements without being made to feel awkward, or uncomfortable about those very things. We are proud of who we are and we want to be proud of who we become, as Americans. Also, because identity is a process of becoming (Hall, 2017), Trinidadian transnational women, like me and the women who are part of this project, must be allowed the space and time to embrace and adjust to the new citizen identity while simultaneously managing the adjustment involved with diluting their Trinidadian identity. My participants have shown that the unyielding concept of nation-state belonging needs to be revisited to make an inclusive space that accommodates and respects a confluence of cultures and a range of types of lived experience.

For the women in my study, asserting Trinidadian identity is as important—and in some cases, more important—as acknowledging their American identity. This divisiveness over difference in national identity remains ubiquitous and also implies a recalcitrant form of belonging. Feeling stuck in a place where you are made to feel unwelcome can be painful and even paralyzing, especially when you must embrace these feelings as deliberate choices. We chose to become American citizens. Admittedly, none of us could have known that in deciding to

become American citizens we would also be participating in a sometimes ungratifying, emotionally arduous journey. Both Symone and Ertha Violet returned to Trinidad only to come back to the U.S. I might muse that, at least for some of us, we decided that being *stuck* here is better than being *stuck* there?⁴⁰ In another sense, I can argue that we have learned how to live with the discomfort of unbelonging. But how do such women as these (un)stick themselves to ideas of a social citizenship after applying for the legal right to belong?

All the participants stress and underscore the importance of family and community in their pursuit of the unnamed “something” more. I don’t know for sure if any of us thought we were searching for a “better life” when we migrated, but we were certainly willing to subject ourselves to new experiences. To get through the tough times and challenging moments, there has been a heavy reliance on family/kinship networks for emotional and spiritual support. For instance, Winer Gyal #1 testifies about her family coming together and praying for her when she was in the liminal space of waiting for her Green Card to be approved. When she first arrived to the U.S., Bernadette often called her father for support with her academic work. Although Symone noted that her father was very businesslike when she called home, she shares a tender moment of affection, being told “I love you” by her dad, that had been unfamiliar in her experience of him in Trinidad. For Ertha Violet, migration was possible because her grandmother sponsored her family’s Green Card and provided them with a safe space and housing on their arrival. Nattie Girl basks in the support of her family upon her arrival and subsequent acquisition of citizenship. It is evident that transmigrants rely on these family/kinship

⁴⁰ My use of “stuck” here reiterates the feelings of being stuck in a place where you feel unwelcome. Symone felt this way in Trinidad because she thought her advanced education would help establish her class status and it did not. Ertha Violet returned to the U.S. after her husband’s retrenchment in Trinidad only to be positioned in a job where she is surveilled and made to feel uncomfortable by her white employers. Yet, she needs the job to help support her family.

networks as rich sources of relational support and encouragement. These transnational attachments between home country and host country continue long past migration, especially when family members are left behind.

Undoubtedly, in addition to family/kinship networks, the value of Caribbean spaces has shown to be quite beneficial as a source of cultural connectedness for these women. Take, for instance, Nattie Girl admits that she seeks out all things “Trini” by involving herself with places, events, food and people related to Trinidadian culture. Also, when she first moved to the U.S, Winer Gyal #1 felt like she moved into little Trinidad while living in Brooklyn, New York. In Brooklyn she was immersed in Trinidadian culture—the West Indian day parade, Trinidadian cuisine, herbs, and spices and, of course, other Trinidadians. Ertha Violet chooses to involve herself in the mediated social spaces of Trinidadian professionals by following their journey and successes on Instagram, which help her to feel connected to the Trinidadian community. Symone chooses to indigenize her locale by planting a kitchen garden of popular Trinidad herbs and peppers. She also supports community businesses run by other Trinidadians. In each case, these women find connections by participating in the societal contributions of other Trinidadians in their localized home/spaces.

Maintaining cultural practices and traditions is an important aspect of the transnational migration experience because it creates spaces of belonging. If you are not part of a culture, then you are excluded and, as such, you do not belong. I would argue that, by insisting upon their own cultural practices, these Black women, as dual citizens, are able to establish and encounter a differential belonging. Over time we all learn to take advantage of both sides of our cultural identities (i.e., Trinidadian and American). Events such as the West Indian Day Parade in New

York or Miami Carnival provide transmigrants with opportunities to experience a taste of “home” complete with all the nostalgia infused by community gathering and celebrations.

In her arrival story, Symone jokes about making (and forgetting to pack) 500 pastelles to bring with her to Miami because the popular Trinidadian Christmas delicacy reminds her of home and family. Winer Gyal #1 remains firm in her aspiration to pass down this tradition of pastelle-making to her children. Like Bernadette, all of my participants try to maintain a cultural citizenship through cultural ties (e.g., through soca music), although they/we are sometimes pressured to develop a hybrid cultural experience to fit into the U.S. cultural life. One primary example of this would be the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday, which does not exist in Trinidad. Although many of us do not celebrate the holiday in the U.S., we embrace the opportunity to spend time with family and friends over traditional Trinidadian food during that time.

We cannot continue to exist as fragments of people who are yearning for distinctiveness while living this country (Alexander, 2016; Celeste, 2017). Perhaps the overarching goal is to see ourselves as whole to undo the “fragmentation” and “pain of dismemberment” of colonization (Alexander, 2016, p. 281). To see ourselves as people with multilayered identities and not a beleaguered race is productive. But how can we reconfigure our constructions of reality to reject the embodied dissonance that comes with feelings of Otherness? We are not just one identity or the Other; rather we are significantly complex, divinely diverse human beings who have been programmed by colonialization to see ourselves as fragmented, fractured and not wholly layered (Alexander, 2006). I cannot choose to be solely Trinidadian or exclusively American any more than I can separate being Black and a woman. These identifications are concurrent and contribute to the ways the women and I understand our cultural bodies in situated contexts.

The assertion of a national identity can be perceived as an affront to those who would rather we blend into *their ideas* of who we ought to be or become. But like Audre Lorde (1984b) insists, we must define ourselves for ourselves otherwise we would be defined by others. To defend our cultural heritage—our birthright—is both an act of resistance and an act of identity negotiation against the dominant cultural narratives. The transmigrant experience is comprised of adaptive strategies that demand challenge and compromise. How do we assess these competing perspectives (Euro-Western vs. Caribbean) to bring about greater acceptances regarding im/migrant experiences? Perhaps the bridge to forging coalitions across difference begins with understanding what home means to the transmigrant and how home continues to live within them/us.

Home

Struggling to Find and Feel (at) Home

Where is home? I asked this question of each of my participants, hoping this seemingly uncomplicated question would provoke an easy answer because it did not do so for me. Home, as a construct of space, place, and belonging has, for me, been complicated by migration. For my participants, the significance of home has also shifted over time and based on specific social locations, so that the construct now provokes two particular sentiments: (1) *Where is home?* and (2) *Where do I feel at home?* Both questions ask about dwelling places and the interconnectedness we feel within them. So that, home can be the place we live (your current address or the place you grew up in), the place in which we feel most comfortable (among family), or the country in which we are born (Trinidad). Home is not fixed. Rather, it represents

a shifting locus of belonging that now invites another question: What is home to these Trinidadian transnational women? In this sense, home is a form of co-existing with the absence-presence of feelings of (un)belonging in specific territorial and geographic locations (Ahmed, 2016). Nevertheless, origin sentiments of home(land) become unattainable in translocal spaces forcing those of us in diaspora to press on and make a way.

All of the women I interviewed spoke about home in terms of family, familiarity, connections, and Trinidad. Most notably, the issue of home/space involves “feeling at home” which resonates deeply for all of them. They all expressed that home is not merely a location *where* people are situated but rather that home *is* the embodied (and often romanticized) sentiment that swaddles the living and historical memory of our homeland, Trinidad. To feel at home is to be among family or a community of people who know you and you know them. To feel at home, is to know that you can be at ease being yourself—Black, accented, educated. To feel at home, is to release the weight of (un)belonging, to just be.

Home is part of our embodied dual citizenship experience. Trinidad is home for Nattie Girl, but New York is the home she has “become accustomed to” (p. 116), which is a sentiment Symone also shares. Symone, however, re-cultivates her home spaces by planting a kitchen garden of Trinidad herbs and spices. This act of planting and reaping is part of her sustainability effort to keep home alive in her current location. Winer Gyal #1 has a conditional understanding of home; for her, it “depends on location” and it can be homeland or other familiar cities like Brooklyn, New York where she has lived and had a community of Trinidadian friends and family. She believes her current dwelling to be her “quasi-home” (p. 116) and reiterates that, although this particular location was intentionally selected, the current political climate of Texas leads her to believe that this dwelling space is temporary and will cease to exist for her in due

time. Thus, the question of how to (re)create home becomes an individual choice and mode of expression.

The (re)creation of home implies an acceptance of difference in multiple contexts. For Ertha Violet, home encapsulates felt experiences and traveling memories of institutional influences such as religion and education. She carefully notes that “religion, family, education do not exist in the same way in the U.S. as it does in Trinidad despite having a beautiful house, car, community” (p. 117). *Doing* is insufficient. Home is the nostalgic memory of homeland that travels with us, it must be felt and that feeling should be familiar and welcoming.

In contrast, for Bernadette home quickly shifted to a site of memory, trauma, and loss after the murder of her father. She recalls the “disconnect” and sense of betrayal by the community in which she grew up in Trinidad and avoided returning home to Trinidad for almost 15 years. In this case, home came to be the site of no return because the memories of what happened there were too painful to reconcile in that location. To compensate for this emotional turmoil, Bernadette chose to build a life in the U.S., although she admits that she does not feel like she belongs in the U.S any more than she belongs in Trinidad. She believes herself to be a Trinidadian who is “just residing in America” (p. 120). This feeling of resignation is not only hers, as Winer Gyal #1 repeatedly voices her mental and emotional struggles as she continues to question her decision to live and raise children in the U.S.

Home is a sacred space (Dillard, 2011). Home is where we are rooted. Home is a form of memorializing the familial. As such, home transcends space, time, and boundaries by connecting and reconnecting the diasporic subject to familiar re-memberings of homeland through culture, language, food, music. To be at home is to experience cultural interconnectedness knowing that you are among family and friends. When these connections are interrupted, you yearn for them

wholly, once more. To feel at home is that intuitive experience of being safe and uninhibited where home becomes a kind of sublime subconsciousness. To these Trinidadian women, home is a specter, a privately whispered invitation to participate and belong that feels like the old home in Trinidad. Avtar Brah (1996) describes this sense of clinging to the past ideas of home as “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination...a place of no return” (p. 192). None of us who have left Trinidad could ever (re)create home as we once lived it. Instead, we are all challenged to (re)create home where we are since “home is also the lived experience of locality” (Brah, 1996, p. 192). In this sense, ideas of home are rooted in our homeland and once we become uprooted, home becomes as much a process of remaking the self in locality as it is remaking home in another country (Aranda et al. 2014; Chawla, 2014).

(Re)Routing Transnational Blackness In Diaspora

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy (1993) states that Black diasporic movement through the Middle Passage means that the diasporic are more a product of the routes we have taken than the roots we come from. In our specific locations, we are challenged to “reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity and historical memory” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 16). This “historical memory” effectively serves as “intercultural positionality” where the diasporic weaves in-between two cultures, two nations (p. 16). What might it mean to release the cultural identity politics attached to location and origin that demand a “located identity?” (Chawla, 2014, p. 108).

Race, gender, class, and culture are all intersectional transnational narratives that speak to ways of being and belonging (Marable & Jones, 2008; Williams, 2018). What could it mean for us to belong? What if belonging for the Trinidadian transmigrant is the expressed counter-narrative to essentialism, assimilation, and acculturation? What if, by choosing to embrace our

cultural identities and practices, we might be able to feel free to be who we are in the spaces we occupy without the oppressive force of multiple marginalizations? What can it be like to reject the venomous alienation of otherness and become welcoming, connected humans to each other?

The collaborative and embodied witnessing, truth telling, and heart writing demonstrated in these stories is imperative to decolonizing knowledges about Trinidadian women's im/migrant realities and lived experiences in the United States. These incredible women trusted me to tell their stories and draw on their voices to speak in those places that are often "foreign" (Madison, 2005, p. 178) to those unfamiliar with both Black lived experience *and* Black women's im/migration experiences. I believe these conversations contribute to a shifting view of im/migrant subjectivities by including the voices of Black, Trinidadian[-]American women as first-hand accounts of im/migrant lives. The stories unearth what Diversi and Moreira (2018) contend to be the "existence of Betweeners, of those experiencing life more often *between* clear categories of identity than *inside* them" (p. 31, emphasis in original).

Such an existence promotes feelings of unbelonging within the dominant culture and, yet, also stimulates cultural community fostered by events and practices that help to construct experiences of belonging. The journey toward spaces of belonging is ongoing and, because of the ways in which the women have been made to feel—excluded, unwelcome, invisible—their day-to-day interactions favor inclusivity. In this context, inclusivity serves as a pathway to a social citizenship where the possibilities of idiosyncratic cultural performances can exist harmoniously. To exist in this way is to participate in "emergent performances" that "encourage an embodied epistemology" that "conjoins through enfleshment knowledge" (Madison, 2010, p. 7). I hope that these embodied and enfleshed knowledges encourage us all to accept responsibility for the

changes we envision for our society, that is, if we do in fact believe that everyone has a right to belong to/in it.

CHAPTER FIVE:
RAIN ONLY STOPS CRICKET

Today, August 31, 2020, is Independence Day in Trinidad. Kes the Band is doing a live performance of his new album called "We Home." I so wish I could be home, in Trinidad, but I'll do what most of us who leave home learn: how to make do. The Trinidad borders closed just after Carnival 2020. This experience is jarring to me. I have never been officially barred from returning home. I suppress so many panicking thoughts and feelings and, in so doing, I experience what Derek Walcott (1986) calls the "long look back to see where choice is born" (p. 39). I sigh a little too loudly, which gets the attention of my husband. He turns his head toward me to make sure I am okay. I half smile to reassure him that I am okay, although I am uncertain if this is true.

I know I made a choice to stay in the U.S, to make a life in America. For the first time, I am staring at the reality of what it could mean "to never go home again, for this is home" (Walcott, 1986, p. 100). Home is where I am with my family.

"We Home," Kes says again. Home.

Kes the Band welcomes the world with one of my favorite tunes "Hello." He segues between songs by saying, "We Home" to remind the audience why we are here and what this music is meant to do. And I feel it. I am here for it.

As Kes begins singing: “I’ll give yuh that sweet type of love, sweet type of love,” I allow myself to be seduced by the sweetness of the moment. I outstretch my arms and then gyrate my hips and waist to the groovy soca beat—easily ketchin’ the rhythm, falling into that familiar Trini vibe. I let the magic of soca music take me away to my sweet, island paradise. The rhythm of soca is magical. It feels like a cultural anointing calling me home with each musical note.

Longing for home is to be in temporal ecstasy. The sweet love he sings about reminds me of those intimate moments right before orgasm—a little painful, extremely vulnerable, and an open willingness to release knowing the release means it is all over. And it is at that precise moment when the feeling begins to dwindle what the longing intensifies, and I feel myself wanting more and more still. The moment passes but the feeling—the sweetness lingers—and you hope you’ll experience it again. But for now, it is enough. That’s how it feels when I miss home. It is liberating and exciting to be fetein’ in my living room with Trini’s around the world while so many people outside of this room are dying from Covid. I don’t have the bandwidth to feel guilty about the death toll right now. I need this moment. “We Home” is breathing life into me.

I pick up my too strong, no salt, passion fruit margarita made with the agave tequila I bought in Mexico three years ago while on holiday with my family. I allow myself to smile, and as Riad begins to play those guitar strings, I can feel them tugging at my own heart strings. I am reminded of my dad playing his guitar, and my eyes well up. This memory, too, is sweet and painful, not at all bitter. My heart is so full and suddenly in the middle of this festive moment, I realize that I am grieving. I miss my dad, my brother, my country. And my heart breaks because I know that I will never have that again in my life. My home as I once knew it no longer exists there. My father lays asleep deep in the hills of Santa Cruz. My brother has his own family and is

fermenting his roots, there. My reality is bold: I will never be in a place with my entire family on this earth ever again. We are now all separated by death, geography, borders, visas, pandemic. This reminiscence brings so much melancholy to me, but it shows me that the way forward cannot be a looking back.

Kes sits before the mic and sings acapella:

“What a beautiful life...” In spite of it all, I have and have had a beautiful life.

The health pandemic of Covid-19 showed that my citizenship is also subject to my geographical location. I cannot always go back home. I am still subject to disciplinary power. I yearn to be in Trinidad where I can freely express my national identity. Some days it truly is hard being a foreigner, even with a passport citizenship in another country. Wherever my body goes, there I am. My body is also my home.

Kes sings again, “We home.”

In a hushed whisper I call back, “Ah reach!”

Reflections On Affective Citizenship, Belonging, Identity, and Home

The expression naming this chapter’s title, “rain only stops cricket,” is a Caribbean colloquialism that has come to infer that life goes on no matter what. And for those like me, who migrated to the U.S., we not just find a way, but rather, we learn how to make our way regardless of the obstacles we face and the oppressions we endure. In all these things we persist and sometimes it makes the felt experience of home more pronounced.

Home travels with us in remarkable and unexpected ways to the foreign lands we inhabit. Home is a site of asserting identity. Roland Barthes (1975) uses the term *jouissance* to describe a kind of orgasmic bliss, a connection experienced beyond the self. This blissful connection is both

temporal and spatial. It occurs in the present and becomes stored in memory. Barthes also suggests that this kind of bliss extends and manifests as *plaisir* (pleasure) when the body “pursues its own ideas” (p. 17). As such, the affective experience of home can evoke feelings of *jouissance* and *plaisir* which culminate in the Cobra as a “continuous jubilation” (Barthes, 1975, p. 8).

The affective crucible of home is a renewal of love for my homeland and for my culture. As the dissertation has shown, the emotional sensations of home are intrinsically cultural. But they are also learned, practiced, formative, complex. These somatically marked (Damasio, 1996), encoded and triggered sensations mean that the experience of Trinidad as my birth land will always be an “embodied joy” that emerges as a result of “a cultural trigger to memories with powerful somatic and emotional elements” (Birth, 2008, p. 104). These memories are a salient and embodied reminder of the home we take with us in all spaces and across boundary/border lines. Memory is how we hold onto culture as the life we once knew, but through the sharing of stories, we keep culture alive in our daily lives. Although we may sometimes fall into the trap where the line between “remembering” and “looking back” seems blurry (Alexander, 2006, p. 275), there is some comfort in the nostalgia of the way things used to be.

Cynthia Dillard (2011) experiences the sacred power of memory as a calling to be mindful and “whole” (p. 4). Our rooted experiences of home become these acts of “dispossession from our past and from our connections to our culture, original homelands, languages and from each other” (Dillard, 2011, p. 4). Chawla (2003) contends that these “acts” as forms of dislocation, become ways of being so much that Dillard (2011) insists we need to examine what it means to see ourselves in the “gaze of another” (p. 4) because we cannot afford to look away. Rather, we should look deeper to better understand our connections with one another.

Memories and the process of (re)membering impacts not just how we connect relationally, but also how we comprehend having a sense of belonging in, and in-between, the spaces we occupy (Soyinka, 1999). In the absence of homeland, I/we rely on the salience of cultural memory to collect, store, and foster ontological security—a state of confidence that most human beings innately experience as a result of having stable personal relationships and connections to their social world, and lived experience which promotes feelings of acceptance and belonging (Giddens, 1990). In this process, we commit to a remaking of the self and home. The hope is that, knowing how the felt sensation of home travels, we no longer feel compelled to chase fragments of those very precious memories and values we already carry within us. We don't need to hunt down aspects of ourselves to connect to home. We are already there. The dissertation has demonstrated that, if we continue to seek home outside of ourselves, we will continue to find dissatisfaction.

It becomes apparent through our stories that how we see ourselves in relationship to others is fundamental to fostering feelings of being 'at home' in the U.S. In these border home/spaces, im/migrants are challenged to connect the contradictory feelings of absence and presence related to missing home by bringing into focus the inevitability of change in the transmigration journey, as a process of renewal and becoming (Hall, 2017). To reframe our understandings of home in diaspora allows for new possibilities in how we participate, interact and experience satisfaction in our daily lives.

My use of stories in the foregoing study contributes to a mapping of the lives that connect knowledge, spaces, places, and locations within diaspora. I experience this work as a bridging of experiences across oceans—relational experiences of living, of doing, enduring, and becoming. As a result, I hope my work helps to demystify border/boundary narratives as it produces situated

knowledges as a form of archiving memory. Our bodies are the vessels that carry these histories, these memories. I don't want our stories to fall into an obscure archival cabinet waiting to be found. We found each other, and by leaning in, to truly hear and listen to one another we can lift up our voices and amplify the sound to be heard.

My journey to, and in, America is as much about the transcendence and temporality of spaces and places as it is about becoming— a coming in/to myself through my pathways and interactions. Perhaps my becoming in America feels incomplete simply because it is. Maybe this is a reality I need to accept. It doesn't mean I am unhappy. Nor does it mean I'm thrilled. Nevertheless, I am certain that had I not left Trinidad, had I not dared and risked it all, I couldn't and wouldn't be who I am today. I needed to learn how to see through and push past fear and self-doubt into the unknown by embracing the uncertain and the uncomfortable. Somehow this very knowledge gives me hope because I know that no matter where I land, I will make a way and I will be okay. The truth is, no matter what we forget, the body remembers and knows when we are home. Only when we enter that space do we relax, breathe, and feel at ease.

Through the conversations with five women and the writing of my own stories, I have come to recognize the salience of a social citizenship in understanding cultural identity. As such, for the women with whom I am in conversation, they/we conditionally distance the idea of being American because of our emotional attachments to Trinidad. For Winer Gyal #1, Ertha Violet and me, we must embrace the Black American experience not only as a form of coalition building but rather as a form of preparing our children to survive and thrive in this country. By narrativizing the relationship between citizenship, belonging and home, I highlight the communicative constitution of identity. In the process of listening to, interpreting, and writing about Black transnational women's lives, I have learned that the way we understand who we are

as dual citizens is related to our positioning in society, perceptions of reality and interactions in situated contexts.

Social Citizenship: Feeling at Home

Maybe being in-between home(s) is about locating the self, family, and friendship networks wherever we are. Maybe home travels in the heart and carries all the things we can no longer speak. But we know when we are home because of how we feel. Maybe feeling at home is temporary but it's not impossible. Although we may never feel as though we belong, we can find ways to (un)belong less, over time.

Home, when viewed as an affective construct, related to a social citizenship comes into being as a function of an inner desire for sites of harmony, peace, familiarity, and nostalgia. And yet, what if the *idea of home* is more fixed than the *lived reality* of being physically at home? What if the emotional attachments to home are more distant as we might like to believe? My perception of home shifts over time and with experiences that impact my resonances of belonging, so that the lived reality of home is about connecting (spiritually, emotionally, intellectually) in homeplaces (hooks, 2019). These interconnections can be social, political, familial, or communal. All of these interconnections impact the social meaning of home as constructed by our heritages, cultures, and experiences.

We feel in, and between, the spaces we occupy. What if we “affect aliens” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 148) reclaim our homeplaces in the spaces we occupy to show that difference can be a tool for unification and not divisiveness? At a time when the U.S. political agenda seeks to persist in unimaginable atrocities by way of implementing punitive policies (e.g., attacks against Critical Race Theory) and repealing protections (e.g., voting rights) for Black people, allyship is

a more productive pathway forward. Celeste (2017) implicates the media as filters of narratives about who are “deserving and undeserving immigrants” (p. 64). The question Black people in the U.S. need to take seriously in 2022 is now one that begs to question who are “deserving and undeserving” American citizens? As James Baldwin (1965) asks, “What is the new identity, for which we need each other” for Black American citizens to recognize that we are not “wards” of America, but rather the architects who built and continue to build this country?

What if *cultural difference* could be reframed as *cultural significance* to examine the commonalities across lived experiences and histories that can lead to more positive coalition building? What if instead of marking how we are different, we ask: what can we learn from each others’ difference to advocate and embody radical change? I don’t pose this question to reify sameness but rather to acknowledge our idiosyncrasies, that we are different, and perhaps share some similarities or commonalities of experience. In fact, as Lorde (1984b) states, “our reluctance to recognize” and deal with our differences results in “distortions” and “misnaming” (p. 122). How we engage our differences significantly impacts our world. What can we do with what we learn from this study to reimagine a global form of connecting to others that vehemently repudiates colonizing efforts of ethnocentricity and xenophobia? And how do we use this learning not only as part of performing our pedagogical praxis but also, in our day-to-day interactions? This is the future I want to build.

Both being at home and feeling at home are emotional and relational orientations to environments, culture and people. In Trinidad we use the term “tabanca” to describe a kind a painful absence akin with being/feeling lovesick after a breakup or, in this case, homesickness and longing to be at home (native country). Our daily use of language implies the deep attachments to home places. Maybe home is the place where I was born, the origins of a place

that nurtured and cultivated the first seeds of my dispersal. Home is a cultural fusion connecting past-presence through affective experiences and memory. Home is deeply felt longing to return to someone, some place. Sometimes home is where I long to return after a long day at work. Home is lying next to my six-year-old son and rubbing his back while he falls asleep at night. Home is being wrapped in a warm embrace by my husband. Home becomes the space in my heart and not only the place where I reside. Being at home means familiarity, an unburdening sense of comfort. Home travels with/in and with/out. Home is where love ignites and lives. Home is t/here. And t/here is where I am.

I confess to the pervasive souring in my spirit about living in America even after everything I have achieved and continue to strive toward. I am particularly uneasy living in America at this moment. Up until 2016, I don't even think I questioned how I felt at all. But the toxic racial and political climate and anti-immigrant sentiment bolstered by the Donald J. Trump Administration has me wondering, like Winer Gyal#1, *why* I am still here. I don't know if this feeling will change, though I would welcome positive change. Had I not known what it is like to be a happy person in another country, this existence would, or could, be construed as just being a part of life. But I've known a life, simpler...potentially a land of limited possibility which is why I chose to leave...but in that life, in that place, happiness was possible.

I challenge myself again by asking, how is happiness seemingly impossible when I have so much? I learned early on in my life that there is no amount of things that can equate personal happiness and a peace of mind. I want more than this seeping, hate-filled country for myself and for my son. And, at the moment, I think it is only going to get worse before it can get better. But I am committed to his future as much as I am committed to mine. I have to fight. I must make a way for him, and those like him and me, to be able to live—and thrive—materially and

spiritually beyond the “boundaries of blackness” (Marable and Jones, 2008, p. 2) in love, peace and harmony.

Transnational Black Feminist Identity

As I wrote in Chapter Two, it took some time for me to develop the cognizance of a critical Black consciousness. Once again, the present writing moment draws me to the late bell hooks (1990) who reminds us that marginality [is] “much more than a site of deprivations” (p. 341). Marginality is also the “site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (p. 341). The stories shared and explored in the dissertation ignite, for me, a sense of hopefulness for what is possible in terms of learning about cultural difference and how we can become empowered because of and not in spite of our difference.

The use of a TBF framework has shown how shared experiences can unite us as a group of people. It reiterates that our material realities demand that we acknowledge our feelings and work toward resolving those moments of irritation and disquiet. What can we learn from each other if we took the time? And more so, what is at stake if we didn't? The reality of being marked by racialized and nationalized difference is exhausting, but how we manage these realities is crucial to the survival and happiness for ourselves and our loved ones.

In the tradition of exalting and learning from Black feminists, sometimes we have to turn to past narratives and the lived experience of those who came before, to make sense of who we are now. In what follows, I present a fictionalized conversation that occurs between me and Audre Lorde (2003), who sternly warns that, if we do not learn how to use our power, it will

most certainly be “used against us” (p. 536). As I press for answers, she⁴¹ offers a perspective about the kind of change I am envisioning that show that change is not just possible but needed.

Lorde: *“Change did not begin with you; it will not end with you but what you do with your lives is an absolutely vital part of that chain.”*

Woodruffe: I just want to be free to be who I am: a Black woman, a Trinidadian, an American. I don’t want to feel pressured to choose one or the other and I don’t want to be ostracized because I fail to make a choice.

Lorde: *“There will always be somebody looking into your face begging you to isolate one piece of yourself, one segment of your identity, hold it up and say ‘Here, this is who I am. Resist it.’”*

Woodruffe: What is the value of difference in lived experience then?

Lorde: *“We learn to use each other’s difference as creative tools for change by learning how to acknowledge all the conflicting parts within our selves and learning how to orchestrate them into action behind our beliefs where we are.”*

*Ase.*⁴²

I include this brief interaction to demonstrate how issues of identity and difference continue to be essential work almost thirty-three years after Audre Lorde delivered this speech. If nothing else, it punctuates the cyclical nature of humanity that all things come full circle. Perhaps the hope that sustains me isn’t just “a promise we give,” but rather, as Amanda Gorman (2022) says, “it’s a promise we live” (para. 16).

⁴¹ The italicized excerpts listed here are taken from the Oberlin College Commencement Address on May 29th, 1989, p. 536.

⁴² This Yoruba saying can be interpreted as “so let it be” or as “the power to make things happen.” To end this section in this way affirms how ancestral narratives guide us in our present lives as a form of manifesting divine energy and power. A colonized version of Ase would be “Amen.”

The Prescient Power of Epiphanies

The affective power of using auto/ethnography to explore lived experience is evident in the stories that comprise this dissertation. In Chapter Two, I wrote that it was not until the writing of this dissertation that realized how conflicted I have been regarding my dual-citizenship identity. The epiphanic nature of this approach to research and writing illuminates issues of identity, conflicts, tensions, and representation (Durham, 2014). Writing as inquiry is not only generative of ideas about the world in which we perform, but also for those who embody cultural performances in this dissertation, who we are within these performances, and who we become, for the good and bad, within this performative labor (Berry, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Durham, 2014; Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 1994).

The episodic and epiphanic moments presented in Chapter Two highlight the complex relational-cultural experiences of being a Black, im/migrant woman living in the U.S. The stories from Nattie Girl, Winer Gyal#1, Symone, Bernadette and Ertha Violet emphasize the power that exists in shared experience to advocate for social change. In fact, a relational approach shines an important light on the mundane and ongoing cultural experiences that shape our lives in ways that matter. These stories are valuable and must not get lost. Similarly, future work on this same topic could study men's lived experience as a comparative study. Also, I would be interested in what could be learned by using a relational-intercultural approach to investigate differential adaptation strategies in the classroom and community for im/migrants and historically excluded groups.

The process of writing the dissertation has entailed exposing more about myself and my past than even I imagined I would be ready and willing to reveal. Yet, by telling my story, and conveying and exploring the women's stories, I draw attention to those moments of uncertainty

and embodied experience that remind me that when we relate, we participate in more than just idle talk or the use of words. Our relating has entailed life sharing and bona fide witnessing. The process of working on the dissertation has allowed me to gradually develop more confidence about my purpose in the academy, and the ways I might choose to continue conducting research about the lives of cultural others. This sense of renewed spirit-energy is also a part of how I orient to my living and social spaces with my family, friends, and community.

The process of writing has, indeed, been transformational (Berry, 2021). My engagement with stories served to reposition how I orient myself in relation to others. In so doing, I enact the process of moving across boundaries, evolving from a state of being to one of becoming. The temporality of this writing experience as its own journey re-configures my orientation to understanding how much culture, and cultural narratives can contribute to the creation of alternative futures.

Finally, this dissertation demands that attention be placed on reconsidering our worldviews, particularly those that regard who raced im/migrants are in the U.S. We must continue to investigate and work to dismantle the oppressive power structures that seek conformity in dominant cultures (e.g., whiteness) at the expense of the value of im/migrant cultures. If we do, in fact, value “diversity” and “inclusion” and “belonging,” we need to invest in our own mutability—the human ability to change. To resist homogeneity, we must be willing to reconsider the parameters of the kinds of work we must engage (e.g., class room engagement, syllabi, hiring practices) to ensure these values are representative of valued differences between cultures and not merely tokenized droplets of institutionalized diversity initiatives.

Writing Meaningful Stories

As Carolyn Ellis (1995) asks, how does the researcher turn ethnographic “data” into a “meaningful story” (p. 313)? The stories I write in Chapter Two are more accessible because they are mine. I felt an increased obligation to represent the stories of Nattie Girl, Winer Gyal#1, Bernadette, Symone and Ertha Violet meticulously. I wanted to invite my readers to “enter” the moment of what it could be like to lime with these women in our own backyard. It was more complicated than I initially anticipated, but it was important to make the sense of who we are as Trinidadians ever-present.

In some moments, I had to imagine how the characters felt when they disclosed particular epiphanies. I remember the heart-stopping moment during our conversation when Bernadette told the story of her father’s murder. Although my father did not die violently, I vividly recall those dark, grieving years that initially followed his passing. By having the shared relational experience of losing a father to whom we both felt close, I felt empowered to represent Bernadette’s experience of loss and trauma with profundity and care for her feelings paying respect to the fragility of her loss.

In all of the stories I have tried to create the conditions for what auto/ethnographers often refer to as “verisimilitude” (Ellis et al., 2011), or writing in ways that allow a story to “ring true” for readers. I did not alter the dialogue among the women in Chapter Three. These are their exact words. My creative role in the chapter entailed establishing the lime, a place where they could meet and be in conversation with each other at a time when we all miss home the most (e.g., Christmas). I take seriously the moral code of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) and always strove to offer accounts of their lived experience that mirrored as closely as possible the conversations we had via Zoom. The depth of the conversations was only possible because I took the time to

develop a relationship with these women. I shared my own stories of migration, of citizenship, of ominous secret keeping in the hopes that it would earn their trust for disclosure. I wasn't merely trying to capture a story, I was opening up my mind to receive their stories. In the end, I hope that I listened carefully enough to show these life stories humanely.

There is a difference between being visible as an American and being recognized as one. Immigrant identities are not neat. The context of our (in)visibility is relative to the constraints of those narratives about raced im/migrant women. We have names. We are feeling and thinking human beings (see Holman Jones, 2016; Pollock, 2006). Our lives might not make it into the Library of Congress to be archived and cataloged, but these stories, and others like them, of the ordinary people who contribute to American society must be heard and valued.

Our origin stories are important. We all come from somewhere and those journeys mark very specific historical, relational, and cultural moments that connect us to lands, people, language, rituals and spirituality. Black women's lives are more than just generic references. They have value and are valuable and deserve to be valued. What are the insufficiencies related to documenting such transnational women's histories? Whose approved terms are transnationals "classified" by and into? How do these classifications contribute to our own erasure and what can be done to desist such erasures? I continue to think about these and other questions. As scholars, we must continue to work with communities that require us to reflexively engage in transformative forms of qualitative inquiry, and especially those that lift up, convey and investigate stories.

This dissertation has been a journey from, a journey [in]to, and a journey toward something bigger than myself. It is a collaborative expression of Black, Island girl magic.⁴³ By writing this labor, I am reclaiming all those moments of being overlooked, rendered invisible, misnamed, micro-oppressed, and I cheer myself on for having the courage to try one more time, one more day.

My Black, Island girl magic pushes me forward to embrace my feelings and emotions as legitimate points of resonance and intervention in my life.

My Black Island girl magic sprinkles the dusting of rebirth and renewal as I reprogram my body-mind-spirit connections to make sense of who I am in connection with others.

This dissertation is more than just a research project. It is my *Soulspiration*—my soulful, spiritual, inspired and goal-driven aspiration. It is the manifestation of dreams. This is soul connected, embodied life writing. I have learned that there are so many different ways to arrive where we need to be, but the greatest loss would be to ignore the messages and lessons I have learned along the journey.

My Trinidadian and American selves affectively bridge my narrowly divided identities that are an accumulation of complex and felt lived experience. Although this affective bridge can divide, it can also connect. Only I can chart my way forward. I can choose to connect with others who are in similar or different places both metaphorically and/or physically. Bridges connect people, places, ideas and attachments to all of these. Bridges can be supportive, and bridges need support. Bridges offer a way to begin moving toward the uncertain places we need to go. Bridges most often last longer than the people who cross them so that our footprints on these journeys

⁴³ The popularized phrase and movement of “Black girl Magic” is often attributed to Clover Hope and CaSahwn Thompson. However, Joan Morgan (1999) has also used this term to signify the “feminine” and “fierceness” of “a black girl’s magic” (p. 54).

become our legacy. In this moment, I find myself agreeing with Kate Rushin's (1981) position that "the bridge I must be is the bridge to my own power" (p. xxxiv). These are my first steps to reclaiming my power.

I am claiming all of my surviving: pandemic, racism and racial injustice, imposter syndrome, isolation, loss, microaggressions and micro-oppressions. I claim every single awakening that has empowered and sustained me over time. I am learning to let go of all the things I convinced myself were supposed to happen, but did not. I am learning how to surrender to the moment and deal with things as they are. This is the beginning of my journey, a phase in my crossing to making a way to destinations, unknown. But let me be clear, no matter where this journey ends, the stories that brought us here are important and will live on.

On Making a Way

What does it mean to make a way?

How much do hope and desire weigh?

The bridge we imagine between us

Are the real things that separate us

What if we could just say the things that keep us apart-

Will that narrow the bridge and bring us closer together

Or

Will it push us even further to contemplate how to reset, reimagine, restart?

Are we really okay with 'othering' each other?

Standing on one side of a bridge

Knowing that what divides us is about power (here, I mean skin color)

We spend too much time pointing out what fails, what hurts and what makes us different.

What feelings are between us?

Hope, failure, disappointment, sadness,

anger, anxiety, ambivalence, support, care, concern

Love.

What can it be like to walk toward each other

With open minds and a willingness to learn

What *might* we learn?

How might we feel about what we learn?

How might we live, differently?

Our lives mean something

And those very things we have experienced have changed us.

Our lives are not static

We are a living re-in(ter)vention

What stories do we hold that we haven't told?

What might change if you do?

Might you discover another version of you?

I am the journey, changing

direction

Still moving forward.

My journey continues with my son long after I am gone

My legacy is being written into history

What kind of life can we dare to imagine?

How to envision possibility?

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APPENDIX A:
IRB EXEMPTION



EXEMPT DETERMINATION

December 7, 2020

Anjuliet Woodruffe
4202 E. Fowler Avenue
CIS 3058
Tampa, FL 33620

Dear Mrs. Woodruffe:

On 12/4/2020, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY001866
Review Type:	Exempt 2
Title:	Transnational Lives: Oral Histories and Diasporic Yearnings of Trinidadian-American Women.
Funding:	None
Protocol:	• Protocol, version 001, December 2, 2020;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance

FWA No. 00001669
University of South Florida / 3702 Spectrum Blvd., Suite 165 / Tampa, FL 33612 / 813-974-5638

APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following list provides the base from which I will interview participants:

1. What was it like growing up in Trinidad in your household? What things were important (e.g., family, school, work, religion, politics) etc.
2. Did you have an understanding of yourself as a Trinidadian citizen growing up? How would you describe your identity back then?
3. How did you live in terms of social class status?
 - a. What kind(s) of experiences do you believe identified you within a particular class status?
 - b. Did others treat you differently in terms of class?
4. Can you think of a time when you were referred to by race vs ethnicity growing up?
 - a. What happened? What did it lead you to think or feel?
5. When did you begin to think of yourself as a Black woman? (Before or Post migration)?
 - a. Can you think of a specific moment or time when this stirred in you?
6. What were your reasons for migrating?
 - a. Do you have a particular story about your migration experience you would like to tell?
 - b. What was your dream in terms of migrating? What came true? What didn't?
7. Did you think that you were simply leaving Trinidad for something 'better' or something 'different'? What emotions might you attach to your migration experience?
8. What is a moment when you knew that you were not in Trinidad anymore?
9. Where is home (for you)?
10. What thoughts of home(s) and memories about home(s) break your heart to remember?
 - a. What is your definition of "home"? Where is home (for you)?
 - b. How important is it for you to feel at home where you are?
 - c. What thoughts of home(s) and memories about home(s) fill you with joy, happiness or nostalgia?
 - d. How does memory (of home) travel with/for you?
11. Fill in the blanks, when I travel through U.S. Customs and Border patrol I feel _____ because _____.
12. What was it like forming relationships /friendships among other Black women in the U.S?

13. What does being an American citizen mean to you?
 - a. Tell me about your process of becoming a citizen
 - b. Describe anything you can remember about your swearing in process. What kinds of feelings came up for you in that moment?
 - c. What do you struggle most with about being Trinidadian-American?
 - i. Is this a hyphenated identity for you or are they separated?
 - d. How do you feel about being American in a post Obama and post Trump presidency?
14. How would you describe your cultural identity now? In other words: who are you in the U.S / In Trinidad?
15. How did you feel when you first learned that the Trinidad borders were closed?
16. If you were to offer any advice, as part of a survival tool kit to your younger self or someone who is migrating to the U.S. for the first time, knowing what you know about living in the U.S. now, what would it be?
17. Are there any questions you would like to ask of me?

The researcher will ask additional questions related to the central foci of the study as the opportunity emerges within the interview, including follow-up probing questions.

APPENDIX C:

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Dr. Anjuli Woodruffe is graduate teaching assistant in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida who currently holds a Graduate Certificate in Women's and Gender Studies. She is a scholar whose research interests intersect intercultural communication, relational communication, performance studies and critical cultural studies. Woodruffe uses autoethnography, poetry, and Black transnational feminist frameworks to analyze representations of transnationals living in the United States. Woodruffe is a proud GSS fellow who was awarded the Fall 2021 dissertation completion fellowship by the University of South Florida. She is the 2021 recipient of the John T. Warren top paper award sponsored by the National Communication Association (NCA) Ethnography Division. Additionally, Anjuli Woodruffe is the 2021 recipient of the Donald P. Cushman award which recognizes the top ranked student paper from NCA.