

## Introduction: “The Unexpected Caribbean” Part II

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When conceptualizing “The Unexpected Caribbean” special issue for the journal of *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, we, as editors, sought to contest many of the stereotypical visualizations of the Caribbean and its diasporas and highlight some of the unexpected counternarratives and innovations in representation that appear in literature, the arts, and society. Focusing on women, gender, and families allowed us to consider how Caribbean women—typically disempowered by the restrictions of the colonial and patriarchal systems in which they have lived—have risen to the forefront of making change in their communities and cultures. We strove to emphasize the numerous roles and contributions of women in the circum-Caribbean—both past and present—and how a variety of configurations of gender and issues pertaining to family wrestle with notions of “Otherness,” regardless of time or space.

We therefore called for essays that countered neo/colonial conceptions of the Caribbean as a destination for tourists; or as a region needing “saving” by foreign business investors, missionaries, environmental groups, and other types of not-for-profit organizations; or as a site for the consumption or extraction of laborers (including sex workers), natural resources, and cultures. As we argued in the introduction to the spring 2021 issue, far from being exotic and isolated islands suitable only as vacation locales or spaces of dire poverty where natural disasters and epidemiological crises repeatedly strike, Caribbean societies have long been realms of incredible intellectual and artistic production and political resistance. The articles gathered for that first issue testify to the fact: novelist Apricot Irving, who spent years of her childhood in Haiti as the daughter of missionaries, contested notions of superior aid-worker and inferior, victimized aid-recipient in an essay transcribed from her keynote address at The

Unexpected Caribbean Symposium held in October 2018. Art curator Grace Ali illuminates how women artists in Guyana—many of them invisible to the rest of the world and even to Guyanese nationals—have challenged negative images of that country in their work and captured images of empowerment, joy, and collaborative energies. JoAnna Poblete complicates notions of women's agency and leadership by limning the history of the Fireburn Queens of St. Croix, who led labor revolts against the Danes in 1878; she interpolated their acts of resistance with the range of roles taken by contemporary St. Lucian women—both in protest against the petroleum industry and in its establishment and maintenance to support their families and larger communities. Yumi Pak also focuses on family as she investigates the depiction of Chinese Caribbean indentured servants in *The Pagoda* (1998), by African Jamaican novelist Patricia Powell; Pak's contribution explores "queerness" in terms of gender and race, upending conventional notions of motherhood, fatherhood, family, and nation. Rigid constructions of nationhood were tackled by Odile Ferly as well: Ferly defies the scholarly trends of homing in on antagonisms between the Dominican Republic and Haiti—and particularly the spurning of Haitians by Dominicans—to interrogate the symbolic role of Dominicanness in the Haitian literary imaginary.

At the time of the 2018 symposium, Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria had recently demolished island communities in Dominica, St. Maarten/St. Martin, and Barbuda and devastated the island of Puerto Rico. Those climatic events brought waves of immigrants to the U.S. mainland from the Caribbean. News reports and social media circulated stories about (white) American resistance to these newly arrived "foreigners," especially those from Puerto Rico, but, as was noted repeatedly by symposium participants, thousands of Puerto Ricans had been travelling back and forth between the island and the continental United States for decades, given Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. territory. For Part I of "The Unexpected Caribbean," Jessica Adams expanded her conference presentation to stress the complexity of Puerto Rico's political and economic relationship to the United States, contextualizing natural disasters, imperialism, and concepts of home in an essay that grapples with legal cases about property rights. For Part II, we seek to extend that conversation with research from a group of scholars who explore factors contributing to the successful integration of Puerto Rican migrants living on the U.S. mainland. Like Adams, authors Alessandra Rosa, Rebecca Blackwell, and Elizabeth Aranda use the trauma of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria as a significant marker of time in their work, citing migration patterns pre- and post- this devastating season. Connections can readily be made to the migratory patterns of other Caribbean immigrants to the States. For

instance, U.S. Census Bureau figures indicate that the numbers of Haitians living in the United States increased considerably after the 2010 earthquake, from approximately 419,000 in 2000 to 587,000 in 2010 (Olsen-Medina and Batalova 2020). (Those numbers are sure to increase after the deadly earthquake on August 14, 2021, followed closely by Tropical Storm Grace.) Rosa, Blackwell, and Aranda's piece gives one better tools to predict how migrants with connections to "home"—both on the island and in robust Caribbean American communities already established in areas like Miami, New York City, Boston, and Washington, DC—might be able to sustain themselves.

Before turning to a fuller description of the articles selected for Part II, we want to articulate our awareness that all the contributors for the double issue are women. Although not completely surprising, we had hoped for greater representation of gender and sexual diversity in the collection. What the imbalance makes clear is that, although much progress has been made in the field of gender studies, for many people in the United States and in the Caribbean, the word *gender* still connotes "womanhood" and a strict male–female binary. We are optimistic that future scholarship will continue to pursue this issue and work at resolving the gap.

Several male scholars did submit promising abstracts for the special issue, but the COVID-19 crisis destroyed travel and research plans all over the world. The pandemic has kept the world at a near-standstill for over fifteen months, impacting the Caribbean in ways that have not been adequately covered in the Global North. Different islands and territories responded differently to the catastrophe, each based on its own resources and infrastructures. While some locales have shown great leadership in their attempts to curb the spread of the virus, more of the region has survived by reacting locally rather than globally, using indigenous knowledge (that is, produced in that space) and relying on community-based efforts instead of formal state assistance. In cases where the government has been slow to act, communities expressed the need to come together and work together. The notion of *Men anpil, chay pa lou* (With many hands, the load is lighter) was frequently applied as people supported and sustained one another in a variety of settings, often privileging the communal over the individual "rights" discourse that was witnessed in many parts of the United States. One set of figures suggests that, overall, the number of deaths from COVID-19 in the Caribbean has been fairly low (CAREST 2021); the devastation has been caused primarily by the effects on the tourist industry, not the virus itself.

Because many Caribbean economies depend heavily on the tourist sector for their survival, the halt of the industry threatens not only the livelihoods but the very lives of so many Caribbean subjects, especially women

heads-of-household who already struggle to make ends meet. This is the case for families relying on tourist dollars in both formal systems and informal economies (hair beading and braiding, beachside souvenir sales, recreational drugs, and so on). Early in the pandemic, “[I]t was already impossible not to notice the ways in which local agro-food producers and food activists in the Caribbean were responding to food insecurity. From that moment on, agroecological initiatives have been key to understanding that food security is not only about accessibility to food, but to food that is healthy and that is safe to procure” (Tavárez, Quijano, and Pacheco 2020, 10). The COVID-19 crisis makes clear that conversations about rebuilding must include familiar and innovative strategies for the local economy, as well as social and educational environments.

At the January 2021 international Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars (ACWWS) Annual Conference, a panel about the impact and responses to COVID-19 in the region highlighted this call to action. Colleagues from a range of disciplines shared both personal observations and state and community responses to the initial stages of the pandemic and ongoing efforts to curb its effects. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago implemented exceptionally tight lockdowns in March 2020; compliance in the former was considered noteworthy in light of the nation’s moniker “Little England” and the retention of Queen Elizabeth II as head of state after independence from Britain in 1966. In Puerto Rico, the lack of mobility and travel restrictions to the U.S. mainland were not unexpected after the treatment of migrants following the devastation of Hurricane Maria. In places with limited supplies, inadequate infrastructure, and ongoing political instability, such as Haiti, citizens resorted to traditional pharmacopeia, employing medicinal plants such as ginger, aloe, and clove to treat coronavirus symptoms. Similarly, Puerto Rican food activists and local farmers initiated small-scale stations with nonperishable goods for pickup, enabling consumers to turn away from high-risk supermarkets and “pre-packaged, store-bought, non-seasonal and non-sustainable food” (Tavárez, Quijano, and Pacheco 2020, 10)—items in high demand and readily available when tourist demands drove the market. Jorge Lefevre Tavárez, Gabriela Quijano, and Dana Muñoz Pacheco perceived a “rich convergence between food activism in the Caribbean and the feminist movement. Not only are women at the forefront of the agroecological production of food, but feminist organizations have been profoundly concerned with calling food insecurity an urgent battle against inequality” (2020, 10).

The lack of oxygen and respirators—and currently, vaccines—mean a host of different solutions have come into play in Caribbean healthcare. At

the time of the writing of this introduction, only 0.3 percent of the COVID-19 immunizations around the world have been administered in the 29 most impoverished nations. Many sites across the Caribbean were counting on the World Health Organization's (WHO) COVAX program for access and growing increasingly alarmed in the early months of 2021 as countries from the Global North purchased large numbers of doses, leaving developing nations vulnerable and unable to compete in the global vaccination market. Some started conversations with India, Cuba, and China to seek access to vaccines. To date, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, St. Lucia, and Dominica have received Astra Zeneca doses from India free of charge, but spiking numbers of coronavirus deaths in India threaten to shift the playing field once again. The islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint Martin—all French territories—have started immunization campaigns facilitated by the French government. Cuba states that it is in a final phase of clinical trials to develop its own vaccines and will be able to vaccinate the whole country by the end of 2021. Interestingly enough, Havana is using the vaccine as a tourist attraction, promising that visitors can get immunized if they come to Cuba's capital city on vacation. The inequities in distribution raise important issues of infrastructure, access, privilege, power, and positionality in a neocolonial and neoliberal market. In Haiti, many people are more fearful of the current political and economic instability, which has resulted in a spike in kidnapping for profit, than of the physical effects of COVID-19.

During the 2021 ACWWS Conference, particular attention was paid to the crucial role of women and community-based organizations in helping to care for others during the coronavirus crisis. Worldwide, nations with women leaders had better health outcomes than those with male leaders. However, the global rise in gender-based violence has been a very real concern in the Caribbean, as well as other impacts on women, children, and families. As several participants of the ACWWS conference noted, however, virtual conferences and journal issues, including our own, do not typically garner the engagement of politicians, Caribbean primary-school educators, health-care professionals, and people from the working class. Finding ways to bring a variety of constituents together for work across socioeconomic class lines remains a high priority.

While we do not have an essay that analyzes the ongoing impact and varied responses to COVID-19 in this volume, we selected two poets—one from the English-speaking Caribbean and one from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean—to consider the pandemic from artistic perspectives. In moments

of uncertainty, grief, and anger while witnessing the spiking numbers of those who had died from the virus, Jamaican writer Olive Senior chose to turn her mind to creativity and observation, tracking “the way events unfolded and how language and preoccupations kept changing in response” (2021, vii). She posted a series of COVID-19 poems on Twitter and Facebook from May through September 2020 as a type of abecedarian, with poems for each letter of the alphabet, considering the effects of the virus on physical, mental, and environmental health but also responses to the disease and what they revealed about society and culture. We selected three for inclusion in our introduction, hoping to highlight the way they express one Caribbean woman’s experiences of the crisis. Above all, Senior used her poetry to connect collectively with a community of readers. In her preface to the published collection, *Pandemic Poems: The First Wave* (2021), she notes,

I regard these poems as more of a sharing with a community than a purely literary endeavor. . . . I started writing these poems as a way of keeping myself engaged and not falling into depression, but I soon realized I was inside a loop that bound me to readers, many of whom told me they waited for a poem each day as it helped to articulate what they were going through. (viii)

“M for Mask” evokes the Carnival traditions of the region, calling on readers to remember the archipelago’s populations, cultural practices, endurance during the solitude of lockdown, and fight against the deaths of loved ones—all images countering tourist stereotypes of a happy-go-lucky people living life by the sea.

### **M for Mask**

Masqueraders know the protective power of masks  
assumed in Carnivals each year to placate the spirit Death,  
embody the supernatural.

Now, Death is here. Masks for everyone is streetwear.

Except in this theatre: No wild carnivalesque disorder. No  
summoning the supernatural. Here mask-wearers offer silent  
intercessions in communal rooms, wrestle Death for Life  
in choreographed routines: calm, concentration, skill,  
compassion, order.

Only when the masks are off do they reveal the traces:  
the daily struggle with Death imprinted on their faces. (4)

On the surface, “G for Green News” asks readers to consider the environmental benefits of lockdown from a global perspective. Deeper consideration

of the poet's heritage, however, leads one to think about the paradox of sustainability in the Caribbean. Cruise ships and other forms of tourist activity cause environmental havoc in the region, and while the pandemic might have allowed waters and air to clear, lessened the amount of waste and unrecycled recyclables in landfills, and prompted residents to return to home-grown traditional foods instead of costly imports, its decimation of the tourism industry had a severe impact on Caribbean economies.

### **G for Green News**

Somewhere, for a brief time  
 in this collective pause,  
 we are witnessing bluer skies,  
 purer water, cleaner air  
 and a friendlier world for bees.  
 A turning back to roots  
 with window gardening,  
 backyard planting  
 and soaring sales of seeds.

Know that every cutting  
 you put into the ground,  
 every seed you dig in,  
 feels like a little tickle  
 on the skin of Mother Earth  
 leaving her smiling  
 and wanting more. (54)

Senior's "V for Vaccine" articulates the connection between COVID-19 and the pandemics of racism and extrajudicial violence on Black subjects. Protests against police violence were not exclusive to the United States or Global North; disparities in policing in different Caribbean sites reveal the legacies of colonialism still flourishing in the region.

### **V for Vaccine**

How quickly COVID-19 has been upstaged  
 by a more insidious injection of hate  
 into the black body that has gone viral.  
 Boots on the ground  
 and no social etiquette required.  
 Unless there is rigorous commitment  
 to eradicating poisonous infection  
 no vaccine to counteract this one  
 will ever be found. (44)

The poem's title resonates in the spring of 2021 as we hear about the global distribution of life-saving vaccines and poor countries' lack of access.

Xavier Valcárcel, a student at the University of Puerto Rico, contributed "3:06 a.m." (translation by Don E. Walicek), a poem that compellingly conveys the anxieties plaguing many young people during moments of isolation in lockdown:

**3:06 a.m.**

Las pencas de la palma  
que es horizonte en la ventana  
arrastran inquietas sus sombras  
por las paredes del desvelo.

Sonando su fuga  
los carros en la avenida  
burlan el toque de queda;  
igual las turbinas  
de los aviones insomnes  
vibrando los techos.

La oscuridad ladra  
mientras mi perra sueña  
entre mi cuello y mi escápula.

El trabajo, el deber, la sangre  
vuelan con mi cabeza que vuela  
a vórtices como murciélago.

A ojos abiertos, inmóvil el resto  
del cuerpo  
intento, sin parpadear  
pensar lo que no duerme.

¿Una cama  
a qué velocidad va a través del  
universo?

**3:06 a.m.**

The stalks of the palm  
that is the horizon in the window  
restlessly drag their shadows  
through walls of sleeplessness.

Sounding their escape  
the cars on the avenue  
dismiss the curfew;  
as do the turbines  
of the insomniac airplanes  
making the roofs rumble.

The darkness barks  
while my dog dreams  
between my neck and my scapula.

Work, duty, blood  
fly with my head as it swirls  
into vortices like a bat.

Eyes open, the rest of my body  
immobile  
I try, without blinking  
to think of what doesn't sleep.

A bed  
what's its velocity as it traverses the  
universe?

The poem's speaker, unable to sleep at 3 in the morning, expresses a loneliness as they dutifully obey the lockdown while others travel across the city and the island. Notably, however, people are absent from the scene: cars, and not drivers, "escape" on the streets as they "dismiss the curfew"; "insomniac airplanes," and not passengers, pass overhead. Desperate to find connection with others, the speaker tries to imagine anyone—anything—else awake and



able to share a conscious moment. The piece is haunting and moving; it simultaneously gestures toward privileges of class, age, and, perhaps, gender—a position that allows for the solitude needed to write unhindered by crowded accommodations and constant childcare responsibilities.

### The Essays in This Issue

The pressures of household duties for contemporary, working-class Haitian women are explored by Sabine Lamour in “Between Intersectionality and Coloniality: Rereading the Figure of the *Poto-Mitan* Woman in Haiti.” Lamour ponders the meaning of the complex *poto-mitan*, or “central pillar,” figure in Haitian historical and cultural contexts, revealing how it is embedded in the legal and political structures of colonial slave society, the economic demands of the postslavery moment, and the present-day feminization of poverty. Rather than celebrating the *poto-mitan* woman as emblematic of female strength and power, Lamour argues that this construction cannot be separated from plantation history, so the role must be understood through the lenses of coloniality and intersectionality to reveal the distinct lack of power these women endure.

Three of the essays in the volume explore women in the arts. In “‘Lioness Order’: The Women of the Reggae Revival Speak,” Alexandria Miller examines how women have taken on increasingly important roles in the contemporary reggae music industry—“unexpected” given their relative absence in the field during the mid- to late twentieth century. Analyzing the lyrics and music videos of Janine “Jah9” Cunningham and Kelissa [McDonald], Miller historicizes the evolution of female reggae singers and how they have altered the rhetoric around women’s positions in reggae culture, which has largely been male-dominated, and in the larger Caribbean society. Sarah Clunis investigates the cultural legacies of the Yoruba masquerade tradition, in which the spirits of deceased ancestors are called to intercede in the world of the living, in conjunction with the colorful tapestries of Jamaican artist Ebony Patterson. “The Passing: The Evocative Worlds of Ebony Patterson’s Dancehall Egúngún” analyzes Patterson’s textile work and other installation pieces, highlighting the intersections of gender, visibility, and death. Clunis extends her interpretations to the urban dancehall scene in Kingston, Jamaica, by insightfully connecting the adornment and clothing used in dancehall culture to Caribbean Jonkonnu celebrations and Egúngún masking traditions in West Africa. In “Elena: Running to Dance and Other Defects in Colonial Santo Domingo (1771–73),” Lissette Acosta Corniel takes readers on a journey

to find the story of Elena, an enslaved woman from what is now known as the Dominican Republic. Piecing together Elena's story challenges conventions of historiography that privilege written documents. Employing the work of Ann Stoler, Stephanie Camp, Michele McKinley, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Acosta Corniel urges readers to recognize their limitations and instead listen for the unspoken details and the silenced voices that can provide a new kind of source. Parsing Elena's recorded "flaws"—attempting to flee, dancing, stealing food, and allegedly trying to abort her pregnancies—from a legal case that posits the woman only as "property," Acosta Corniel interprets Elena's embodied resistance as "a roar in the archive, allowing her body to 'speak' through actions." Elena's flights from one plantation to another also evoke a struggle to find home.

Home is also addressed in "¿Nuestro nuevo hogar?: Examining Puerto Rican Migration and Conceptions of Home, Place-Making, and Belonging" by the aforementioned Rebecca Blackwell, Alessandra Rosa, and Elizabeth Aranda, who contribute to social sciences scholarship on Latinx integration in the United States by interviewing Puerto Ricans who migrated to Florida across a span of several decades. Speaking to longtime residents as well as those who fled the devastating hurricanes of 2017 and focusing on emotions as an essential yet often neglected part of the migrant experience, the authors consider how complex perceptions of home, such as the location of one's family, the site where one's identity can be fostered and freely expressed, or a place of comfort and security, can aid or inhibit the sense of belonging and integration in new environments. And in "San Andres, a Herstory, or Writing Caribbean History From the Margins," Laura Lopez Martinez takes us on a journey to the archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia, Colombian islands in the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Nicaragua that share a history and culture that are often neglected—both within Colombia and in the larger Caribbean. Engaging the 1987 novel *San Andres, a Herstory* by Keshia Howard-Livingston, which narrates nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories from several women's perspectives, Lopez Martinez questions the construction of a national identity in Colombia, exploring the tensions between the mainland and the archipelago. She demonstrates how fiction can contribute to the anticolonial, antimasculinist project of challenging the official and frequently incomplete histories that exclude the voices and experiences of marginalized subjects. Through an exploration of Howard-Livingston's work, Lopez Martinez considers how depictions of quotidian experiences, traumatic encounters, and each character's search for identity reveal slavery and its

legacies to be intrinsically tied to demarcating new boundaries of the Caribbean, extending the expected borders beyond conventional geographies.

“The Unexpected Caribbean,” Part II, thus invites readers to embrace a wide range of contributions to Caribbean history and society, from explorations of herstory to women’s participation in the oil industry to music and art. The essays engage with each other and the issues raised by the contributors to Part I, disputing notions of the “Other” from both outside and inside the Caribbean, whether that Othering results from stereotypes of the region’s peoples and cultures, the politics of neocolonialism, class conflicts, or overly narrow definitions of womanhood and motherhood. The authors we have selected engage in a type of conversation on the page, approaching the topic of “the Unexpected Caribbean” from a variety of Caribbean and diasporic spaces, disciplines, and points of view. We hope you will enjoy the “conversation” as much as we have and will take up some of the questions and challenges raised here in future research.

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*Guest Editors*

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