

BLACK FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY

*Theory, Politics, Praxis,
and Poetics*

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IRMA McCLAURIN

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KARLA SLOCUM

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND BLACK FEMINIST POLITICS IN CARIBBEAN RESEARCH



BEGINNINGS IN NATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

Native anthropology represents an approach to and perspective on anthropological inquiries in which questions of self-identity, politics, and research methods are central. Anthropologists of color and from the Third World embraced the concept beginning in the 1970s, arguing that researchers “native” to or “inside” a particular region or community had valuable but often neglected insights to lend to our understandings of how people live, think, and act. In doing so, they questioned anthropology’s reliance on European-derived models for interpreting non-European people’s lives. They

also challenged the common assertion that for the sake of objectivity, researchers should be personally distant from those they study.¹ Proponents of native anthropology, then, sought to render the discipline more inclusive by incorporating typically unheard anthropological voices and perspectives. Their goal also was to reconfigure notions of “appropriate” researcher–informant relations. Despite what some critics and revisionists of native anthropology have charged,² the point of this reconfiguration was not to claim that one group of anthropologists could always understand a community better than another or that so-called native anthropologists had a particular corner on knowledge about the community with which they identified.³ Indeed, most anthropologists and other researchers sympathetic to the idea of a native anthropology have admitted that sometimes they found themselves partially “outside” of a research community. Some also mentioned that they have had to gain acceptance for research plans through members of a community with whom they felt they shared racial identity, gender identity, nationality, and/or residence.⁴

In recent years, there has been a slight resurgence of interest in native anthropology. Critiquing and rethinking the field, authors have looked more deeply at what it means to be “native” or “inside,” asking especially if one can be and when.⁵ Kirin Narayan’s article “How Native Is ‘Native’ Anthropology” represents one of the latest explorations of the concept from a postmodern position.⁶ Narayan rejects native anthropology because she believes that it ignores the social locations from which we can know a society (whether we claim it as our own or not). Thus, for her, the concept operates on essentialist assumptions about identity and authenticity. To explode the native category, she uses her own status as an Indian national with a diverse family and residential background to argue that she could never be a native researcher in India.

The daughter of a German father and American mother, [my mother] had just married my Indian father. Yet these terms—*German, American, Indian*—are broad labels deriving from modern nation-states. Should I instead say that my mother, the daughter of a Bavarian father and a WASP mother who lived in Taos, New Mexico, became involved with her fellow student at the University of Colorado: my Indian-from-India father? Yet, for

anyone familiar with India shouldn't I add that my father's father was from the Kutch desert region, his mother from the dense Kathiaware forests, and that while he might loosely be called "Gujarati" his background was further complicated by growing up in the state of Maharashtra? . . . I invoke these threads of a culturally tangled identity to demonstrate that a person may have many strands of identification available, strands that may be tugged into the open or stuffed out of sight.⁷

Narayan goes on to claim that perhaps a non-Indian national who had spent a few years living in the country would be more native than herself or would perhaps be able to grasp dimensions of local life to a far greater extent than herself. She asserts that our abilities to be distant at one moment and close at another with people we study vary with context. Achieved closeness through long-term interaction is more valid and may provide greater insights than closeness conferred by birth.

Centering her contentions within a contemporary anthropological and postmodern discourse about the shifting and multiplex nature of identities, Narayan is correct to deconstruct reified categories such as "native" and "insider," and to call for a more complex reading of how identity and social position shape our interactions. But I believe that the way she maps her identity to all of its infinite pieces leads her into a few potential problems. First, because she means to suggest that identity is constructed and multifaceted, she spends less time discussing why, for both professional and personal reasons, we may choose to render particular aspects of our identities significant in certain contexts. She refers to the way a researcher's personal position and allegiances may shape the research, but she does not give much thought to why and how that personal stance or allegiance may play out:

We are all incipiently bi- (or multi-) cultural in that we belong to worlds both personal and professional, whether in the field or at home. While people with Third World allegiances, minorities or women may experience the tensions of this dual identity the most strongly, it is a condition of everyone even of that conglomerate category termed "white men." Whether we are disempowered or empowered by prevailing power relations, we must all take responsibility for how our personal locations feed not just into our fieldwork interactions but also into our scholarly texts.⁸

This brings me to my second point. Narayan rightfully refers to a sense of professional responsibility that exists for all of us, but she ignores how a researcher's politicized identity may engender a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the professional realm. She sidesteps the possibility that many of us link ourselves to a particular community because we attach specific goals and actions to who we are, how we view ourselves, and how we are seen by others from that community. Put more succinctly, as researchers we may assume specific roles and responsibilities precisely because identity traits such as gender, race, and nationality—however socially constructed—have real implications for how we and the people we study can and do live our lives.⁹ For this reason, we may purposefully "tug into the open" particular strands of our identity to make a point. The politics of research can be based on this interplay of how we view ourselves, how we position ourselves in terms of our socially constructed identities, as well as how others (in a community we have defined as "ours") receive and perceive us.

I have chosen then to reclaim the value of native anthropology's political dimension by discussing the role that my own identity politics played in shaping my master's research project. How I thought about my Black female identity when conducting a project about Black Caribbean women influenced the conception and design of that work. It did so especially in terms of my effort to create less hierarchical informant-researcher interactions between the women participating in my project and myself. Thus, I argue that the way I channeled my identity politics into the research design to create more even relations between myself and other Black women in the project is a Black feminist anthropological concern. At the same time, I reveal some of the field research awakenings that led me to appreciate the nuances in differences between myself and the Caribbean women I studied, in particular the unavoidable separation between us as North American researcher and West Indian informant. Ultimately, these awakenings led me to concur with Narayan that we must be cognizant of the extent to which the fluid and constructed nature of our identities can connect us to people in the field. However, in contrast to Narayan, I argue that developing a research strategy because of those identities is also

possible and important, particularly to a project centered in Black feminist politics.

FEMINIST INSIDERS AND BLACK FEMINIST POLITICS

In the 1970s and 1980s, a feminist literature developed that, like the native anthropology material, interrogated the intersection of politics, (gender) identity, and research methodology. It also sought to carve out a wider space for the often-neglected female voice in the social sciences and to acknowledge the greater ease that women researchers might have in understanding women's experiences in society. Taking the native anthropologist stance further, feminists in this camp argued that taking a feminist research stance should mean attempting to avoid hierarchies between oneself and one's female informants, while seeking to address gender inequalities in general. One means to achieve this, they said, is to openly reveal (sometimes cultivate) one's tacit connection to the women participants in our studies.¹⁰ Admitting and taking into account one's identity background and beliefs about the research topic could also help to decenter researcher privilege and work toward larger feminist goals.¹¹ Articulating a feminist standpoint theory, Sandra Harding stated:

The best feminist analysis . . . insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny. . . . We are often explicitly told by the researcher what her/his gender, race, class, culture is, and sometimes how she/he suspects this shaped the research project. . . . Thus, the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests.¹²

Underlying these arguments is a preference for expressing and engaging a sense of responsibility to and unity with informants and potentially to their causes.¹³ Also at the heart of these arguments are feminist beliefs that a woman's gendered position provides crucial insights.

Yet, feminists in the latter part of the 1980s and into the 1990s debated what a woman researcher can know (about the women she

studies). In a discussion of "situated knowledge," Donna Haraway argued that women occupy various identity spaces that are related not only to gender but also to race, class, age, and nationality.¹⁴ Multiple identity positions render it impossible for women researchers to hold complete knowledge of the world of female informants; the two groups would differ from one another at least by professional status. "What then is our role?" and "What can we aim to achieve?" were some of the questions academic feminists asked. The response was an ensuing discussion about the intersection of identity and research possibilities. It is interesting how these discussions differed from ones about native anthropology. Part of the feminist concern was linked to questions about how we can best wed our feminist stance with "appropriate" research strategies; the concern was never to wonder whether one can be different from other women and feminist at the same time. Yet recent critics of native anthropology—not seeing the political content to the concept—have not asked what the difficulties of a "true" native anthropology mean for (ethical or responsible) research practices. Instead, they have been consumed with questioning whether it is possible to be native at all.

Black feminists perhaps have been involved with all of these questions. Part of Black feminist writings includes discussion about feminism and research pedagogy, taking into account the role that gender and race identities play within informant-researcher relations. For instance, many Black feminist researchers seek to address or help undo the oppression that Black women experience as an outgrowth of their social identities.¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins is one of the best known social scientists to articulate a Black feminist position. She applies feminist standpoint theories to argue not only that all Black women have some shared experiences of race and gender oppression but also to contend that Black academics have a particular role to play in explicating and ameliorating these oppressions. For her, there is a critical connection between Black feminist (academic) thought and action, and there is a specific role for Black feminist "intellectuals" in the transformation of Black women's condition:

Black women intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought for several reasons. First, our experiences as African-American women provide us with a unique standpoint on black womanhood

unavailable to other groups. . . . Second, black women intellectuals provide unique leadership for black women's empowerment and resistance. . . . Third, black women intellectuals are central in the production of black feminist thought because we alone can create the group autonomy that must precede effective coalitions with other groups.¹⁶

In this passage, Collins underscores a connection between a Black feminist scholarly consciousness (about Black women's experiences) and the call to act on it.¹⁷ It is this call that signals a political dimension to academic work performed by Black feminists and directed toward changing and/or working with(in) Black women's causes.

Black women anthropologists engaging in ethnography and other forms of research about Blacks and/or women have articulated aspects of this thought as well as aspects of the thoughts expressed by native anthropologists and feminists. They have done so most notably by expressing personal and/or political convictions about the topics of their research. Many, often referring to their involvement in and sensitization to civil rights issues in the United States, write about how race consciousness motivated their research on issues of race inequality.¹⁸ These and others speak honestly about their desires to channel that work into transformative action or to correct widely held stereotypes about Black women in particular. Thus, we have witnessed Black women anthropologists attempting to marry their political and personal allegiances to groups that are partially defined by race and/or gender with the approaches and outcomes of their work. Our best intentions notwithstanding, some of us have had to think through how we are different from the Black men and Black women we study and how these differences intersect with our professional goals, leading us to a negotiation of expectations. It is this tricky negotiation that I explore further in this chapter.

TRAVELS IN RACE, GENDER, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND PRACTICE

One point in my life when I found myself reflecting deeply on the meaning and politics of my identity as a Black woman occurred when I was traveling in the Caribbean on a work assignment. In

1986, I worked for an international agency as group leader to twelve U.S. high school students who would participate in community development projects in Grenada. The goals of the project were twofold: to assist a Grenadian organization in their youth skills projects, and to provide U.S. students with a cross-cultural exchange experience. The students in my group tutored local youth in academic areas and worked alongside them in various vocational training projects. This focus on youth skills and academic performance reflected the agency's link to former Grenadian leader Maurice Bishop's socialist New Jewel Movement, in particular its commitment to educational reform.¹⁹

Grenada is probably best known to inhabitants of the United States as the island country in which we carried out a military invasion in 1983. The official reason for that invasion was to "rescue" U.S. students enrolled there in medical school who may have been caught in some of the country's political upheavals. However, the country's socialist path was certainly unsettling to U.S. political interests in the region and likely helped spur the sudden military takeover. Three years after the invasion—at the time of our group's stay—the legacy of the U.S. presence was evident in many ways. We saw graffiti thanking the United States for its "intervention" and heard tales of the days when the U.S. military arrived. At times, the stories suggested a bias in favor of the United States, although this sentiment certainly was not universal.

Like most Caribbean territories, Grenada has a population that consists of a majority who can claim African descent, a small East Indian minority, and an even smaller White contingent. The White presence is publicly invisible but, as in the rest of the region, has left the imprint of its domination through various postcolonial social configurations such as a popular valuing of things European and, more recently, things American. But this trend is not universal. Our group resided in a Grenadian town in which there was open hostility toward Whites, especially Americans.²⁰ This was significant because all but one student (an Asian American) and myself were White. It was not long before most of the group had had several unsettling encounters. Community members gave them hard stares, uttered racial epithets, and made threatening gestures toward them. On one memorable occasion, this anti-United States/White

hostility was expressed by several Grenadians in a truck, who vigorously waved machetes and shouted racial epithets as they passed the students on the road. For the students, this moment was particularly jolting and shaped many of our future discussions of cross-cultural encounters and expectations about foreign travel as (White) Americans. After all these experiences, the students modified their behavior in an attempt to appear less like “typical” Americans, and as they began to work in the community, the relations between the townsfolk and themselves were not as tense.

My own initial experience, however, was quite different from that of the rest of the group. When alone, and even sometimes when with the students, I did not receive the same critical comments about being American, or about being White. When walking in other Grenadian towns, I was often mistaken for a local or a resident of another Caribbean island—that is, until I spoke and revealed my American accent. And when I walked around the town in which we lived, people were intrigued by me as a foreign Black person, wondering how I could look like them and be American at the same time (as if all Americans are White). I found Grenadians to be immediately accepting of me and curious because of this common look, rather than showing hostility toward me as an American.

Thus, the status that the students experienced versus the status that I experienced in the United States, both of which were partially circumscribed by race, were inverted in this momentary space. The Grenadian setting provided a kind of paradox to the typical daily existence to which we were accustomed. As White, wealthy Americans, the students had been accustomed to roaming relatively uninhibited in the world; their race, class, and nationality afforded them that mobility. In Grenada, however, they did not hold the privilege with which they were most familiar; they learned that wealth and Whiteness did not grant them full access wherever they chose to live. In my case, I maneuvered with greater ease and in a less obtrusive way than I did in many U.S. settings. Paradoxically, I seemed to have access to more venues than usual.

The notion of my racial identity connecting me to Caribbean Blacks came up for me again in another Caribbean travel moment. A few years after my Grenada experience, and in part because of my Grenada experience, I went to St. Vincent (an island just north

of Grenada) to embark on field research for my master’s thesis. As a master’s student, I intended to study Vincentian women who transported and sold produce in other parts of the Caribbean. Market women’s activities have been a focus of anthropological studies of the Caribbean. Most studies of market trade have emphasized the economic “rationality” of women’s noncapitalist practices or the role the women played in the small-scale agricultural production and distribution system.²¹ I believed that although this emphasis acknowledged the predominance of women in the field, it had glossed over the implications of women’s participation in such work; I also noted that it had almost completely ignored the question of race. Thus, I sought to engage the research further by looking into the meaning of trading for Black women’s lives. I wondered: What did it mean for women to participate in this activity? How did women inter-island traders, who engaged in transnational work practices and who often managed households on their own, negotiate their domestic and trading responsibilities?

The questions I developed grew primarily out of my training in development anthropology, a field in which part of my studies considered transitions to capitalism in noncapitalist or precapitalist economies of the Third World. I also pursued the subfield of women and development, and was especially interested in shifts in the sexual division of labor and in women’s work loads—shifts that resulted from the separation of reproductive and productive activities under the formation of state societies and capitalism. My Vincentian study, therefore, was couched within a 1980s social science feminist trend, especially with a “women and development” focus, to investigate the exploitation of women’s labor under capitalism.²² This research, with its Marxist and development orientation, did not view race as central a variable as class and gender. Yet, race was at the forefront of my personal motivations for pursuing the topic. I was sensitized to the central and historical place of African-descended women in Caribbean market systems and was motivated by an understanding of this history.

In addition to following a feminist Marxist approach, I was persuaded by the literature on feminism and research methodologies.²³ So I began my project with the assumption that adopting a feminist research pedagogy would help link me to Vincentian women’s

work struggles—as I perceived them. Part of my appreciation for a feminist research approach stemmed from a course project I conducted concerning women victims of domestic violence.²⁴ In that project, I looked at the women's shelter experience as a form of empowerment for women who had been battered. I purposefully inserted my personal thoughts into the interviewing process to diminish my distance from the women interviewees and to avoid appearing as someone without a position on the women's experiences. Similarly, in the St. Vincent study, it was important that I equalize my relations with the women traders. Showing support for them was crucial to me not merely as a feminist but as a Black feminist studying Black women. Certainly, my personal experiences and race consciousness brought me to that place.²⁵ And as I said, my appreciation of the history of Black Caribbean women in informal trading activities, and in managing heavy domestic and extra-domestic work loads, also influenced the role that race would play in shaping my project as a political one.

Thus, I chose to place myself as participant observer, interviewer, and ethnographer of traders' work spheres to achieve my goal of uncovering Afro-Caribbean women's work struggles. As in my study of women victims of domestic violence, I held preconceived ideas about the topics I wanted to pursue and the approaches I wanted to take, but by applying feminist research strategies and methods, I also intended to allow the traders themselves to define their concerns and issues. I felt that such strategies, coupled with my own race-based political goals, would create a research methodology through which I could reveal my support for other Black women's social experiences. To me, this approach meant that I could experiment with less hierarchical encounters between us. Surprisingly, my notion of building solidarity between the women I studied and myself took unexpected twists and turns in the field.

dian colonies, the island has a legacy of plantation slavery and colonialism. These features produced an enduring European influence in a context in which African descendants have been in the majority in most of these island populations from the sixteenth century to the present. St. Vincent's economy is geared toward growing and exporting agricultural goods, particularly bananas,²⁶ although this focus has not prevented the development of domestic and regional trading. Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, independent itinerant traders formed a vibrant part of the country's informal economy by purchasing produce in St. Vincent and trading it in different Caribbean markets.²⁷ In the late 1960s, the Caribbean Commonwealth's creation of free trade zones facilitated this activity, but in the mid-1970s, as free trade between islands diminished, several changes occurred.²⁸ Among these was a shift in the gender composition of inter-island traders so that by the early 1990s, more than 70 percent of Vincentian traders were women, although in earlier times men had been in the majority.²⁹ Although women had never been barred from inter-island trade, it seems likely that men's domination of this lucrative field had defined it as a male work sphere. But rather than inter-island trading dying out as men abandoned it, smaller-scale women traders entered in the 1980s. Monique Lagro and Donna Plotkin suggest that as the field reorganized to become a smaller-scale venture, more women took up trading partly because of the small capital outlay needed and also because of the previously established social networks among kin across the region upon which the women could draw.³⁰ Small numbers of men continued to trade intra-regionally in the 1980s, but those who did were concentrated in the activities that yielded higher returns, such as importing appliances and exporting livestock. Caught within a gendered work hierarchy, women, by contrast, worked in the areas that brought smaller returns and required more physical labor and time. Part of their motivation stemmed from the independence afforded by this task as well as the possibilities for expanding into greater and more lucrative trading activities. As part of their weekly routine, they purchased various crops from Vincentian producers and landowners, shipped the goods by boat to Barbados or Trinidad, and then flew to these overseas markets where they would sell their goods.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS OF THE WORK OF WOMEN TRADERS

Located in the eastern Caribbean and comprising one of the Windward Islands, St. Vincent is a small country of 150 square miles and approximately 110,000 people. Like most former British West In-

Aware of these features from my reading of the literature, I focused my research on material constraints and gender ideologies as obstacles to women traders' work, and I became interested in the ways women participated in social networks to overcome these obstacles. I argued that inadequate shipping and handling resources diminished traders' possibilities for profit making. Yet, I observed that women and men were impacted differently by these inadequate resources because virtually all of the male inter-island traders were financially better suited to withstand economic setbacks.³¹ For example, many men operated fairly large businesses and channeled their goods to a wide array of markets in the Caribbean, and sometimes beyond, thus cutting their risk of being hit hard by shifts in a given market. By contrast, as a way to gain revenue, most women traders relied strictly on the closer and more accessible markets in Barbados and Trinidad. When these markets bottomed out (as they did at points in the 1980s and early 1990s), women lost money and usually gave up trading for a period of time.

My research in this area also showed that at an institutional level, gender ideologies worked against women. A good example was the composition of the Traffickers' Small Business Association (TSBA), an organization responsible for coordinating transportation of traders' goods and providing material resources. Although all traders drew on TSBA resources, not all were actively involved in making and influencing TSBA policies. Rather, an all-male contingency of large-scale traders dominated the board of directors and other formal positions within the organization. In 1990, only one woman sat on the board of directors, and none held a formal position in the TSBA. Meetings of the TSBA membership also were highly hierarchical and stratified along gender lines. Typically, the TSBA director informed traders of new policies and asked for their vote; the women members were completely silent and always voted in favor of whatever policy the director presented.

In effect, although it was a traders' organization, the TSBA was not an agency *for* women traders. Alternately, most women relied on assistance from family and friends; they often paid relatives or friends living in Barbados or Trinidad to sell their products in overseas markets. Such networks were a key mechanism through which

women managed their responsibilities as mothers and mates, and they enabled women to participate in this transnational activity.³²

My concern with the traders' work constraints and their means of dealing with them stemmed from my anthropological interests in economics, gender, and development. I knew that women heading households in the region frequently worked amid a variety of economic constraints.³³ I also knew that social and informal networks were a common way that Black Caribbean women dealt with these circumstances.³⁴ Black women's tendencies to manage work roles inside and outside of the household by using informal exchange networks had historical ties to African slave women's experience in the Americas.³⁵ These historical and contemporary dynamics rendered the topic of my project a Black feminist concern precisely because they pointed to the legacy of slavery, gender ideologies, and labor exploitation among Black women. These academic, historical, and personal features led me to position myself as a Black female researcher who strove to offer support to Black Caribbean working women's struggles by documenting their working lives and exposing the problems they encountered. My goal was not to achieve solidarity by participating as a social activist or by using my work to lobby against women's problems. Rather, my intention was to support the women traders' cause by making their situation more widely known and by explicitly revealing my political and academic stance on the matter.

HONORARY WEST INDIAN, CHILD, AND STRANGER

In retrospect, I now realize that my thoughts and intentions at that time bordered on romanticizing the field experience and that, contrary to my goals, I risked minimizing important differences between myself (a North American academic) and the women I studied (working-class Caribbeans). In this dilemma I was not alone. In the last two decades, several researchers claiming a native or (partial) insider position based on race and/or gender have struggled to coordinate their pre-research politics with field realities.³⁶ Indeed, part of this contingency includes Black women anthropologists who have returned from the field and frankly discussed how they were

unprepared for the different racial categorizations and gender ideologies in South America and the Caribbean. Local identity constructs challenged their preconceptions not merely about gender and race but also about who they were or could be vis-à-vis their informants. Many mention having to reconcile their preconceived assumptions about a link between themselves and the people they would study,³⁷ whereas others admit grappling with the ways they were locally constructed (unexpectedly) as racialized, gendered, and national researchers.³⁸

This was the case with two Black women anthropologists working in Jamaica, Faye V. Harrison and A. Lynn Bolles. In different ways, both noted that people they encountered in the field were suspicious of their work and drew a clear distinction between the anthropologist as North American researcher and themselves as West Indian working-class people. Bolles states that in her study of working-class Jamaican women, she intended to practice ethical research and engage her sense of responsibility toward the "powerless people" she wanted to study. Yet her class, education, and national identity served as "barrier[s] to both friendship and research."³⁹

Similarly, Harrison reveals that

Oceanview folk perceived me to be almost anything other than my own self-conception, i.e., a Black social scientist with a strong identification with oppressed Black Jamaicans. While the majority of Oceanview people saw in me a middle-class "brown" woman, some presumed and insisted that the "American doctor doing research" was socially—if not genealogically—"white." . . . Interestingly, my gender may have assuaged some of the hostility and suspicion surrounding my role as researcher. On the one hand, I was an outsider asking a lot of questions; and I was an American asking questions during a time when the American presence was considered by many to be ominous. On the other hand, I was a seemingly innocent young woman, in many respects naïve about Jamaica.⁴⁰

In my own case, as I embarked on various strategies to obtain data about the traders, my initial attempts were impeded by traders' perceptions of me. I tried to talk with women on shipping days while they were waiting to load goods onto the boats, yet at first they showed extreme disinterest in meeting with me. Most avoided me

by not responding to my approaches or by blatantly telling me to talk to someone else. Eventually, as most anthropologists do, I broke through this barrier and later learned why people were hesitant to talk with me. When they first saw me asking questions at the docks, most had placed me not as a North American but as a Vincentian. Approaching them with questions caused the women traders to assume that I was a government representative sent to obtain information about traders' work. This meant that I was marked as someone to fear because I might charge them higher fees or monitor their compliance with shipping regulations.⁴¹ In their eyes, I appeared to fit local categories of class, and probably color, that were different from the ones the traders (mostly rural, "lower-class" women) occupied. They also placed me into their categories of nationality, assuming I was Vincentian as well.⁴² As in Grenada, it is likely that my outward appearance as a Black person led them to not see me as an American. Even as I became closer to some of the women over the months, they remained surprised that I could be Black and American. They sometimes went to great lengths to place me somehow as a Vincentian or West Indian, on occasion objecting when others (who did not know me) referred to me as White due to my complexion and/or social class.⁴³

Throughout my journey in St. Vincent, I encountered moments of being close and distant to the traders. What guided these fluctuations were traders' perceptions of my identity and my own perceptions of and responses to their ideas. I saw myself like them and had expected that, similarly, they would see themselves like me, at least according to our race and gender commonalities. Instead, they placed me in local constructions of identity, sometimes in ways that made me "like them" and at other times in ways that made me "different." Initially, they saw me simultaneously as Vincentian because of my appearance (race) and as "above them" because of my status as a researcher. As time passed, the ways in which we were differentiated and familiar included gender as well.

I learned very quickly, for example, that we did not hold a similar consciousness about the racial dimension of gendered work. Whereas I expected to support their struggles as women working in a historically undervalued, male-led, and labor-intensive activity, they did not perceive their work obstacles in this way. To them

the major obstacles were material constraints and divisiveness among traders. None of the women I encountered ever complained of gender inequality in the TSBA, nor did they speak of the low value attached to trading as a Black woman's task. Some even echoed the sentiments of the TSBA directors that it was inappropriate for women to be in the official leadership roles of the organization. Thus, we could not build a bond based on our conversations about women's work either in historical or contemporary contexts.

At the same time, my experience interacting with the traders was a very gendered one. Rather than seeing me as an adult working woman who could empathize with their lives or who could appreciate their work dilemmas, they connected to me as a surrogate daughter. As a young, single, childless woman in pursuit of education, I fit their ideal of what a daughter should be. Ironically, in many cases, I was only a few years younger than some of the traders themselves. But because I looked much younger, was in school, and was single and childless, they incorporated me into their family and working lives as one of their own female offspring. For example, all of the traders with whom I lived considered it more appropriate for me to be a companion to their daughters than to themselves. Whether I visited or lived in their homes, they expected me to socialize with their daughters rather than spend time talking about trading. As a household guest, I always slept in the rooms with their teenage daughters for "company," even in cases where a single room could have been available to me.

As with their daughters, traders told me how to style my hair and wear my clothes, and they corrected me when they felt I had performed these tasks improperly. I also participated in household chores, watched children, and prepared and served meals to their male partners. There was no moment more difficult for me than when, at a trader's request, I carried a prepared lunch to her partner at his work place. As I walked through the village carrying a basket of food to an all-male construction site, I received many comments of acceptance for this act, even though it was an uncomfortable role for me to play. But daughters, my study showed, often substituted for their mothers in various work tasks, and the traders clearly thought this was an appropriate role for me.

That I was expected to fill in for the traders by performing tasks

almost seemed to be the women's way of resisting the true purpose of my stay. They acknowledged that I was there to study traders' lives, but simultaneously they displayed curiosity and discomfort about my inquisitiveness and note taking. This part of my life did not seem to fit the role they expected of me as a young female student. My independent female status also puzzled them, prompting questions—about my mother, why I was in St. Vincent without her, and why I did not still live at home with my parents in the United States. My response that I lived and traveled alone because of school won me nods of understanding and also generated simultaneous looks of disbelief at the level of my independence.⁴⁴

Although as a "daughter," I was made familiar within the ways of St. Vincent, the traders also situated me as an outsider. One example was the surprise they expressed at what I did (e.g., my independence and note taking); another is the ease with which they told me what I could not do or handle because of my foreigner/outsider status. Although local children were expected to find their way through villages, I, a stranger, was not presumed to have the same level of competency. The women frequently sent very young children to accompany me whenever I traveled through local communities, even though my months of residency and traveling alone in the areas demonstrated that I was quite capable of independent movement. In a similar vein, traders bought food for me that was not customary to their diet, or they would cook atypical meals. Not only were they attempting to show me local food or to honor my visit, but they were implying that local food was not suitable for me. As an American in their homes, I was in the elevated status of honorary guest, but my age, educational pursuit, and unfamiliarity with local life placed me under their protection.

The insider/outsider, daughter/student spaces I occupied were made most clear to me in my friendship with "Ellen." She was the first woman who had responded to my inquiries at the docks on my first day. Although Ellen was no longer a trader, I spent more time with her than with anyone else. From her I acquired a history of the earlier days of trading and knowledge of the multiple work spheres in which women traders operate. But as Ellen and I grew closer, I learned several valuable lessons about myself as researcher, Black woman, student, and friend.

From the start, unlike some of the traders, Ellen made frequent references to our class and nationality differences. Such references, embedded in her comments about my behavior in contrast to hers, not only revealed her expectation of our specific roles; they also indicated that she saw me as a stranger most times and as a child almost always. During my first visit to her house, she revealed her concern about our class distinctions when she profusely apologized to me for her living conditions. "You see my house? Me poor," she said, seeming to anticipate shock from me over her surroundings. My own behavior in her world seemed to surprise her because it contradicted her expectations of me: "Look!" she exclaimed to herself when I took up a seat on the ground next to her, "she's sitting down on the ground [rather than on the chair]!" Such surprise suggested that Ellen thought it beneath me, as a foreigner/American, to sit next to her on the bare ground.

What she permitted me to emulate was limited if she thought the behaviors too inappropriate—"No, you can't do it!" she scolded loudly when I tried to help her carry sacks of produce. The more I tried to participate in her activities, the more she seemed frustrated with my attempts to "be like her." As I sought to work alongside of Ellen, so as not to appear to be above her, she expressed her belief that it was inappropriate for me to work or eat like her. She frequently reprimanded me, as she would a child, insisting that I should not step outside of who I was supposed to be (foreigner/researcher/American) and reminding me that we were not the same. Only when I assumed the role of passive observer and listened to her stories or watched her work around the house was she more at ease.

By continuously foregrounding the status differences between us, Ellen and the other traders almost shattered my goals because they constantly reminded me that the most we could ever be were distant friends or perhaps close strangers. Ironically, only in my role as surrogate daughter did I learn the most about gender roles in the household and about mother-daughter relations. These social relations were critical to how traders managed the obstacles they confronted in their domestic trading and work. Because such obstacles were, after all, a major concern of my research, I ended up with the quintessential participant-observer experience. At the

time, however, I did not realize the value of my experience or of the data I collected, unintentionally, because I had not expected to be involved or to support traders' working lives in this way. Thus, although I was frustrated by my daughter status, it became critical to my subsequent analysis and understanding of how Black Caribbean women negotiate personal and domestic obstacles to their work. More important to my political goals, I was able to contribute concretely by alleviating some of the domestic tasks that interfered with traders' busy schedules.

RESOLVING THE "POLITICAL NATIVE" IN ME

According to Brackette Williams, our informants "construct our value" through their own cultural translations of who we are and who we represent while among them.⁴⁵ For her, as we traverse the slippery terrain of being neither entirely "native" nor entirely "foreign," we experience a kind of shifting "betwixt and between" of who we are and who we can be as participant observers in diverse field settings. But for some of us who desire to claim insider status, the foreigner space is uncomfortable. It seems to go against everything we expect of ourselves as participant observers, especially if we attach a political purpose to that role. I felt discomfort in my daughter status because I feared that it would impede my political goals of solidarity with the traders. As a result, I resisted the local categories into which the traders placed me, not realizing that just like them, I too was trying to impose my own constructions of them, and my relation to them, based on my belief that we shared common bonds around race and gender. I learned a lot from the traders, who became my teachers, but the knowledge I acquired was not only about their trading work schedule or about social networks. Rather, they revealed to me the impossibility of dislodging the imbalance in the researcher-informant relationship. Most significantly, they taught me that in the field encounter, researcher and informant participate in a mutual construction of one another—constructions that shape the nuanced nature of the stranger-friend dynamic, and that ultimately determine under which conditions we can be close and under which we are distant.

But what does all of this mean for native and Black feminist

anthropology? Today, it feels embarrassing to acknowledge the struggle I underwent to negotiate out of who I was and who I represented to the traders. I take comfort in the admissions of several other native anthropologists mentioned previously, who came before me, and I am convinced there are others yet to come. For these latter, I would admonish that for those of us who see ourselves as partial insiders, and who are concerned to accentuate and engage that partial part of our identities as anthropologists, we should be less concerned about whether and how we are outsiders. Attempting to downplay differences of class, education, or even gender does not allow us to circumvent the outsider part, if for no other reason than that our informants will not let us forget who we are.

Being simultaneously outsiders and partial insiders need not frustrate our political motivations and goals, even when we acknowledge difference and power between ourselves and those we study. Indeed, although my ideas about solidarity with Vincentian women traders stemmed from an idea of gender inequality, work, and race that did not correspond to their lived realities, my Black feminist anthropology politics remained. This was evident in the methods I chose, in the particular aspects of women's lives that I chose to document, and also in the critiques I made of the constraints under which Black Caribbean working women continue to operate.

Even while the women I studied rightfully deconstructed my idea of shared race and native possibilities, I channeled my work in a political direction that suited my professional and personal goals. Thus, an important lesson for me has been the recognition that we can reconcile our "native politics" with field realities. That is, we can interrogate the local categories of identity construction in the places where we do our research, but we need not see the categories as obstacles. Rather, as we analyze how we differ from those we study and consider the impact of such differences on our research goals, we can still identify a set of responsibilities to which we will adhere in our work and which we hold toward the people who participate in our research. If our purpose as engaged Black feminist anthropologists is a political one (e.g., to challenge power and oppression), we can draw on our knowledge both as insiders

and outsiders. In this way, we can better connect the field experience with our politics.

NOTES

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1. Delmos Jones, "Towards a Native Anthropology," *Human Organization* 29 (1970): 251–259; John L. Gwaltney, "The Propriety of Fieldwork," *The Black Scholar* 11, 7 (1980): 32–39; idem, "On Going Home Again—Some Reflections of a Native Anthropologist," *Phylon* 37, 3 (1976): 236–242; Khalil Nakhleh, "On Being a Native Anthropologist," in *The Politics of Anthropology: From Colonialism and Sexism towards View from Below*, ed. Gerrit Huizer and Bruce Mannheim (The Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 343–352.
 2. See, for example, John L. Aguilar, "Insider Research: An Ethnography of a Debate," in *Anthropologists at Home in North America: Methods and Issues in the Study of One's Own Society*, ed. Donald A. Messerschmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 15–26.
 3. Faye V. Harrison, "Ethnography as Politics," in *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology for Liberation*, 2nd ed., ed. Faye V. Harrison (1991; reprint, Arlington, Va.: Association of Black Anthropologists and American Anthropological Association, 1997), 88–110.
 4. See Helán Page, "Dialogic Principles of Interactive Learning in the Ethnographic Relationship," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 44 (1988): 163–181; Patricia Zavella, "Feminist Insider Dilemmas: Constructing Ethnic Identity with Chicana Informants," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, 3 (1993): 53–77; and John L. Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), xii–xxx; Nakhleh, "On Being a Native Anthropologist."
 5. E. L. Cerroni-Long, "Introduction: Insider or Native Anthropology?" in *Insider Anthropology*, ed. E. L. Cerroni-Long (Arlington, Va.: National Association for the Practice of Anthropology, 1995), 1–16; José Limon, "Representation, Ethnicity, and the Precursory Ethnography: Notes of a Native Anthropologist," in *Recapturing Anthropology*, ed. Richard Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), 115–136.
 6. Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is 'Native' Anthropology," in *Situated Lives: Gender and Culture in Everyday Life*, ed. Louise Lamphere, Helena Ragone, and Patricia Zavella (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 23–41.
 7. *Ibid.*, 26.
 8. *Ibid.*, 35.
 9. The term *race* is often placed in quotation marks to denote its status as a socially constructed category. Because I believe that it has real-life implications, I do not mark it in this way.
 10. See Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research* (London: Routledge, 1983); Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1990), 30–61; Joyce Ladner, "Introduction to Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman," in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 74–83.
 11. Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" in *Feminism and Methodology*, 1–14.
 12. *Ibid.*, 9.
 13. Diane L. Wolf, "Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, ed. Diane L. Wolf (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 1–55; Ladner, "Introduction to Tomorrow's Tomorrow."

14. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, 3 (1988): 575–601.
15. Ladner, "Introduction to Tomorrow's Tomorrow"; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990; reprint, New York and London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991).
16. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 33–35.
17. In a discussion of three waves of Black women's activism in U.S. history, Ula Y. Taylor shows that nonacademic Black women (e.g., political activists and health care activists) also have developed a feminist and race consciousness that they channeled into action, addressing Black women's oppression. In this sense, she extends Collins's ideas to include a broader spectrum of Black women actors attempting to improve the condition of Black women. See Ula Y. Taylor, "Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism," *The Black Scholar* 28, 2 (1998): 18–27.
18. Harrison, "Ethnography as Politics"; Leith Mullings, *On Our Own Terms: Race, Class and Gender in the Lives of African American Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).
19. Much of the Caribbean that was colonized by the British still follows a model of the British education system. Students who do not pass Common Entrance exams at the end of their primary school education have limited options for continuing in school. Many drop out in their adolescence.
20. Another group of students sponsored by the same U.S. agency worked in a town on the other side of the island, where they were received more favorably than the students in my group. According to the leaders of that group, the townspeople were glad to have a group of Americans living among them.
21. Victoria Durant-Gonzalez, "Higglering: Rural Women and the Internal Market System in Jamaica," in *Rural Development in the Caribbean*, ed. P. I. Gomes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 103–122; Sidney Mintz, "Men, Women and Trade," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (2): 247–269.
22. Lourdes Benería and Gita Sen, "Accumulation, Reproduction and Women's Role in Economic Development: Boserup Revisited," in *Women's Work: Development and the Division of Labor by Gender*, ed. Eleanor Leacock and Helen I. Safa (New York, Westport, and London: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1986), 141–157.
23. Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?"; Wolf, "Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork"; Ladner, "Introduction to Tomorrow's Tomorrow"; and Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."
24. Karla Slocum, "Methodological Research on the Empowerment of Women," unpublished paper, May 1989.
25. Harrison, "Ethnography as Politics."
26. See Lawrence S. Grossman, "The Political Ecology of Banana Exports and Local Food Production in St. Vincent, Eastern Caribbean," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 83, 2 (1993): 347–368.
27. Monique Lagro, *Women Traders in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines*, Consultant Report (Port-of-Spain, Trinidad: United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [UNECLAC], 1988).
28. Andrew Axline, *Agricultural Policy and Collective Self-Reliance in the Caribbean* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1986).
29. Lagro, *Women Traders in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines*; Monique Lagro and Donna Plotkin, *The Agricultural Traders of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Dominica and St. Lucia*, Consultant Report (Port-of-Spain, Trinidad: UNECLAC, 1990).
30. Lagro, *Women Traders in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines*; Lagro and Plotkin, *Agricultural Traders of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Dominica and St. Lucia*.
31. Karla Slocum, "Managing Markets and Households: The Case of Women Inter-island Traders in St. Vincent," M.A. thesis, Binghamton University, 1991.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Joycelin Massiah, *Women as Heads of Households in the Caribbean: Family Structure and Feminine Status* (Paris: UNESCO); Dorian Powell, "Caribbean Women and Their Response to Familial Experiences," *Social and Economic Studies* 35, 2 (1986): 83–129; Nancie L. Solien Gonzalez, *Black Carib Household Structure: A Study in Migration and Modernization* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969); Helen I. Safa, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974).
34. Christine Barrow, "Finding the Support: A Study of Strategies for Survival," *Social and Economic Studies* 35, 2 (1986): 131–176; Judith Gussler, "Adaptive Strategies and Social Networks in St. Kitts," in *A World of Women: Anthropological Studies of Women in the Societies of the World*, ed. E. Bourguignon (New York: Praeger, 1981), 185–209.
35. Karen Olwig, "Women, 'Matrifocality,' and Systems of Exchange: An Ethnohistorical Study of the Afro-American Family in St. John, Danish West Indies," *Ethnohistory* 28, 1 (1981): 59–78; Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).
36. Zavella, "Feminist Insider Dilemmas"; Harrison, "Ethnography as Politics"; A. Lynn Bolles, "Of Mules and Yankee Girls: Struggling with Stereotypes in the Field," *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 10, 4 (1985): 114–119; Ingrid Banks, "Black Expectations: Hair, Transparency and Discomfort in the Research Field," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, 1998.
37. Angela Gilliam, "From Roxbury to Rio—and Back in a Hurry," in *African-American Reflections on Brazil's Racial Paradise*, ed. David Hellwig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 173–181; Bolles, "Of Mules and Yankee Girls"; Harrison, "Ethnography as Politics."
38. France Winddance Twine, *Racism in a Racial Democracy: The Maintenance of White Supremacy in Brazil* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 9–11; Irma McClaurin, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 16–18.
39. Bolles, "Of Mules and Yankee Girls," 116.
40. Harrison, "Ethnography as Politics," 99–100.
41. Despite my dress and accent, which were not typically Vincentian, it is possible that the prevalence of emigration led people to assume either that I was a returning migrant originally from the island or that I was raised abroad but had Vincentian parents. Migration is a key feature throughout most of the Caribbean, and various economic conditions and government policies have rendered it a fixture in St. Vincent society. Those who have migrated and those who have not remain connected, materially and ideologically, through a variety of transnational practices. See Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Christina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Australia: Gordon and Breach, 1994).
42. I include color here because I have a fair complexion that, especially in the Caribbean context, can link a person to a higher social class.
43. Although no one in the United States has questioned my identity as a Black person, oftentimes in the British Caribbean people have commented on my relatively fair complexion. Some have wondered if I am biracial, or as one person put it, "if my people are Black."
44. Dorinne Kondo describes her field experiences as a Japanese American in Japan, where she negotiated a similar daughter status. The Japanese family she lived with assumed that because she was Japanese American, she would fit into their constructs of a young, single Japanese female. This led her to experience conflicts between her Japanese self and her American self. See Dorinne Kondo, "Dissolution and Reconstitution of Self: Implications for Anthropological Epistemology," *Cultural Anthropology* 1 (1986): 74–96.
45. Brackette Williams, "Skinfolk, Not Kinfolk: Comparative Reflections on the Identity of Participant-Observation in Two Field Situations," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, 72–95.