



Performing West Indian Childhood across Oceans and Time:¹
Gender and Identity in Marlene Nourbese Phillip's *Harriet's Daughter*,
Merle Hodge's *For the Life of Laetitia*, and
Cyril Dabydeen's *Sometimes Hard*
—Cynthia James

Introduction: West Indian Adolescence as Transmigratory Space

Canada has become home to West Indian writers like Marlene Nourbese Philip (Trinidad and Tobago) and Cyril Dabydeen (Guyana), whose young adult novels, *Harriet's Daughter* and *Sometimes Hard*, respectively, have resonances within the context of a larger international body of West Indian children's literature. These two novels establish clear links, for instance, with a young adult novel by Trinidadian writer Merle Hodge, *For the Life of Laetitia*. For while *Harriet's Daughter*, set in Canada, looks back to the Caribbean, *Sometimes Hard* and *For the Life of Laetitia*, set in Trinidad, look outward to the big life of the metropolis—in these two cases, New York. This paper intends to examine these three texts in order to reveal significant aspects of their relatedness and to introduce readers of Canadian literature for

young people to relevant West Indian texts published both outside and within Canada, a territory that is sometimes referred to as “the Caribbean of the North” (Dabydeen, “Places We Come From”).

The West Indian ethos is founded on a historic, enforced transplantation of peoples, and on continuous migration and return between metropolitan cities and the parent Caribbean region. Such endemic patterns of movement have earned West Indians the description of having transnational identities (Waters 4) and have also spawned the notion of Caribbean “tidalectics,” the cyclic and recursive ebb and flow of the ocean that Kamau Brathwaite describes in *ConVERSations* (226). At the core of these configurations of fluidity, though, are perceptions of self that West Indians negotiate daily—perceptions embedded in the alleged poverty of the region and the consequent yearning for betterment and social

mobility. In this context, migration becomes a stage for self-enactment, in their eyes and the eyes of the world. It is particularly during adolescence, a period already fraught with its biological instabilities, that young West Indians become aware of the possibility of migration. The teenage yearnings—both his own and those of and his adolescent peers—that Caribbean-born Canadian Cecil Foster records of himself in *A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada* are highly representative (35–39). In the 1960s and 70s as now, migration was seen as a path toward self-fulfillment “for anyone with personal ambition”; more than that, “[i]mmigration was a status symbol” (35).

Caribbean Canadians Marlene Nourbese Phillip and Cyril Dabydeen, and Trinidadian Merle Hodge set their young adult novels, *Harriet's Daughter*, *Sometimes Hard*, and *For the Life of Laetitia*, in the midst of this fluid, make-or-break West Indian adolescence. In *Harriet's Daughter*, fourteen-year-old Margaret Cruickshank, the last child and second daughter of a West Indian Canadian family, has never set foot in the Caribbean; yet in the heart of Canada she lives under her father's law of “Good West

Indian Discipline.” At the point when she is trying to understand the factors shaping her identity, she meets Zulma, the newly-arrived Tobagonian who is dead set on going back to her Caribbean home. Dabydeen's *Sometimes Hard* enacts the Nourbese Philip plot in

reverse. Trinidadian Leroy Blue is about to have his mother's long-awaited dream of his migration to live with his aunt in New York come true. Leroy looks in from the nether side of the West Indian revolving door to the metropolis. Unlike Bumpin' Joe, his local steel-band idol, who is going to New York with a promise of fame and fortune, Leroy does not know what his future holds.

By contrast, in Hodge's *Laetitia*,

there is no overt migration for Lacey, the adolescent, Trinidadian, female protagonist. Oceans and time separate her from her mother, Mammy Patsy, who has migrated to New York to pursue the dream of an education that was impossible at home. But while Lacey has no full “barrel child” status, dependent on regular remittances shipped home, her psychological connections to her mother, who is slaving in a New York hospital, are inscribed in her obligation to perform well at school. All three characters are Black and of low or lower-middle



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social-economic status. They also have in common that, wherever they are located in the diaspora, they are bound to a performativity that identifies them as West Indian through their particularities of gender, race, and class.

In this paper, I use “performativity” first to refer to the socially constructed realities—such as gender, race, class, and skin shade—in which the texts are embedded. This use of performativity interprets characters as “an embod[iment] of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention” (Butler “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 521). However, social conventions are multi-faced and emanate from various sites. Thus, not only do I analyze gender, race, and class for the identities they project, but also I analyze the way in which the so-called powerless and marginalized in West Indian societies, in dealing with globalized realities constructed for them, are continually reshaping the plays in which they are caught with new performances. Additionally, I use “performativity” in the context of J.L. Austin’s concept of the power of speech acts to make reality by going beyond the illocutionary and perlocutionary. In order to show how these areas of performativity interconnect, I will refer to work by bell hooks, Paul Gilroy and Manthia Diawara, and especially to the work of Judith Butler on “linguistic vulnerability” and gender, as articulated in *Excitable Speech* (1–41) and *Undoing Gender*.

In this paper, I discuss both the established roles which circumscribe the characters in the novels because of their places within their societies and cultures, and just as important, the ways in which the characters respond to those roles by resisting, adapting, and varying them. In other words, I argue that the fluid spaces of adolescence, time, and transnational movement combine in the young adult novels examined to present characters with the challenges of trying out and reconstituting evolving West Indian identities. The process of reconstitution requires them to negotiate generational perspectives, and make quick shifts between old and new cultural patterns. The characters achieve these quick role changes through instruments such as dream, impersonation, and the adoption of the role of satirist, calypsonian, and class clown. When their acts fail, they seek physical escape or suffer psychological breakdown. The characters’ performances of reconstituted identities are examined first against a background discussion of the performative in West Indian and Black-diasporic-postcolonial discourse, and subsequently, under four headings: (1) negotiating modernity, (2) negotiating the body as transmigratory space, (3) negotiating totems of West Indian culture, and (4) negotiating the Creole and other empowering speech acts. The paper concludes with a brief comment on ideological issues surrounding writing West Indian childhood into the twenty-first century.

The Performative in West Indian and Black-Diasporic Postcolonial Discourse

Although childhood and growing up are pervasive themes in West Indian fiction, as evidenced in seminal works such as V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, Michael Anthony's *A Year in San Fernando*, Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the field of West Indian children's literature and particularly young adult fiction is small. In fact, when Merle Hodge expressed her concern for the development of Caribbean children's literature at the first Caribbean women's international conference in 1990, she noted that "[c]hildren in secondary school are exposed to Caribbean literature that is aimed at an adult audience" ("Challenges of the Struggle for Sovereignty" 207–08) and this is still the case sixteen years later. One obvious implication is how acutely the gaze of the West Indian child, both as reader and as character, is trained on rites of passage into adulthood. A survey of this fictive passage into adulthood through its reflection in a comprehensive anthology of twentieth-century West Indian literature such as *The Routledge Reader of Caribbean Literature* (edited by Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh) suggests a creolized, multi-ethnic ethos, fraught with colonial and postcolonial contestations (Donnell and Lawson Welsh 78).

Early in the anthology, the picturesque, tropical idyll is set in the context of "those that be in

bondage," contrasting the beauty of the region with its denigrating legacy of slavery and indentureship (35). Writers of the 1930s, such as C.L.R. James, foreground race, class, colour, and workers' struggles. The pre-Independence period of the 1950s and 60s, which follows the fallow period of World War II, ushers in chest-beating claims of self-actualization in the face of imperial occupation, as demonstrated in Martin Carter's poem, "I Come From the Nigger Yard." "Writing back to the empire" becomes more concentrated in the ensuing decades, marked by the "history of the voice" of the 1970s, with its reclamation of links to the ancestral mother tongue. In this era, a Caribbean aesthetic is slowly being acknowledged with the once-despised Creole as its cornerstone (Donnell and Lawson Welsh 296). It is women writers like Hodge and Nourbese Philip who launch a children's literature in the 1980s; and most of them do so within a feminist project—similar to that of the male writers—of contestation against colonialism, foregrounding the East Indian, the African, the Creole, and the European (Donnell and Lawson Welsh 368–73). Although not referenced in *The Routledge Reader of Caribbean Literature*, by the end of the century, the sphere of gender broadens to include male issues. With particular reference to adolescents within the Caribbean, concern rises over alleged male marginalization and male academic underperformance (Reddock 137–84).

For all its grounding in a regional reality, however, one of the enduring paradoxes of West Indian literature is that this reality is written out of an ethos, largely Afro-diasporic, by writers who have migrated to centres like London, New York, and Toronto.

Wherever they live, West Indians are conjoined in a struggle with the “other-ed” of the postcolonial diaspora, and subject to hegemonic practices, a large part of which they perceive to be encoded in racism. Rebutting this otherness projected on them entails its own syncretic diasporic performatives. As Manthia Diawara explains:

For people of African descent, blackness is therefore a way of being human in the West or in areas under Western domination. It is a compelling performance against the logic of slavery and colonialism by people whose destinies have been inextricably linked to the advancement of the West, and who have therefore to learn the expressive techniques of modernity: writing, music, Christianity, and industrialization in order to become uncolonizable. They have to recuperate the

category black from the pathological space reserved for it in the discourse of whiteness, and reinvest it with attributes that are valorized in modern humanism.



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The recuperation of self that Diawara speaks of wears both private and public masks for the West Indian in his status as part of the metropolitan “other-ed.” As bell hooks notes with particular reference to the African-American ethos in which she grew up, “[p]erformance was important because it created a cultural context where one could transgress the boundaries of accepted speech, both in relation to the dominant white culture, and to the decorum of African-American cultural mores” (212).

She describes the “African-American engagement with performance-as-art,” as a range of lived realities, as a site of resistance, and as “manipul[ation] in the interest of survival” (210–13). These three elements may seem to be contradictory sites for any one person to inhabit simultaneously. In their performance of race roles, however, the less powerful adopt conscious and unconscious behaviours, through repetition and

habituation, because of the challenges to their identity and dignity they face daily. Mimicry and minstrelsy are two examples of learned performances that arise out of the need to manipulate in order to survive, the need to resist in order to protect dignity and identity, and the need to face the challenge of daily living. Paul Gilroy explains mimicry and minstrelsy as performative elements, linked to survival, resistance and daily living in the following way:

Survival in slave regimes or in other extreme conditions intrinsic to colonial order promoted the acquisition of what we might now understand to be performance skills, and refined the appreciation of mimesis by both dominant and dominated. Apart from the work involved in enacting their servitude and inferiority while guarding their autonomy, people found significant everyday triumphs by mimicking and in a sense mastering, their rulers and conquerors, masters and mistresses. . . . This characteristic drama was developed close to the powerful bodies that were simultaneously serviced and manipulated. It was elaborated in the covert social arena that became the public world of oppositional identity. The dramaturgy of power that haunts today's racial politics and contemporary expressive cultural codes was first "formatted" in those grim locations. (" . . . to be real" 14–15)

The parallels between these sites of performance and those of lived realities for people of West Indian heritage are obvious, not only in the Caribbean, but also in predominantly white metropolitan cities, because of the similarities of historical experience and cultural backgrounds within the Black experience in all parts of the New World.

It is in the context of West Indian identity as a unique phenomenon, and yet part of diasporic postcolonial discourse, that I examine adolescent performativity in this paper. It is in this context, too, that the adolescent males Leroy Blue of *Sometimes Hard*, Marlon Peters of *Laetitia*, and Jonathan Cruickshank of *Harriet's Daughter* are discussed alongside the female characters. For, as Judith Butler notes, gender operates within an interconnected field of ideas about genders and their relationships; "one does not 'do' gender alone" (*Undoing Gender* 1).

Negotiating Modernity

A five-to-seven hour plane ride transports West Indians in and out of North American metropolitan modernity, but what of the quick transnational adjustments they are called upon to make when they land on either side of the divide? Both in the Caribbean and in the metropolitan city, but more so in the metropolitan city, the adolescent West Indian is constantly juggling identities, from home to work or from home to school. To compound the situation, as

Cecil Foster notes, in spite of having become citizens or even being born in the metropolis, West Indians (like many non-white groups) are still perceived as immigrants, to the point of being deported to Caribbean countries if they fall afoul of the law (26–34). It is against this background that the protagonist of *Harriet's Daughter* should be perceived.

In *Harriet's Daughter*, Margaret (Harriet), a second-generation West Indian, lives in the home of her Barbadian father and Jamaican mother—a home run on the “longtime” West Indian child-rearing principle of obedience to Good West Indian Discipline (GWID). Whenever she gets out of hand, her father threatens to send her back to Barbados for a more stringent form of this correction. He uses these threats both nostalgically and as a measure of control, since Canadian law gives children rights against parental sanctions such as corporal punishment, which is normal in West Indian homes.

Thus, Harriet has to balance being Canadian with being West Indian. For her, it is not simply a matter of choosing her Canadian identity at times in order to escape the archaic GWID; she is fascinated by her West Indian heritage, and wants to claim an identity within this continuum to which she already belongs. Not knowing what being West Indian is at first hand, she is attracted to the newly arrived Zulma from Tobago. Zulma, a teenager like herself, becomes her conduit for embodying a more relevant teenage West

Indian ethos.

In “Places We Come From: Voices of Caribbean Writers (in English) and Multicultural Contexts,” Cyril Dabydeen examines just these dynamics of “the assertion of identity” that accompany the sense of being an outsider for the West Indian in Canada. Citing his own *Shapely Fire*, Dabydeen notes that “a real shaping is constantly taking place . . . enriched by the varied cultural stream in the fusion of old and new traditions.” In Canadian writing he sees “the impulses of urbanization invariably add[ing] to the unfolding destiny and aesthetics circumscribing the immigrant and indigenous energies as the writers continue to cross numinous boundaries . . .” The result is a “renewed awareness of kin and ethnicity” and “an intersecting of the longing for place with memory.”

Harriet's Daughter enacts similar international trajectories in the meeting of the Canadian urbanized real and subconscious ancestral memory. Harriet fashions a modern brand of West Indian ethos based on a selection from within a continuum that has, at one end, the old West Indian principles of her father, and at the other, those of the newly arrived Zulma. For, while Harriet rebels against the GWID, she does not debunk it in totality. Instead, she embraces an alternative GWID—the GWID of the loving Tobagonian grandmother whom Zulma speaks of, as opposed to the uncompromising Barbadian one

whom her father remembers. The GWID she adopts is serious-faced as Zulma's grandmother, but based on understanding and love.

Thus Zulma becomes a figure of West Indian re-definition for young adults in the diaspora. Through contact with her, Harriet can perform the West Indian-ness that is lost to the young West Indian born outside of the West Indies. In spite of the fact that she represents everything he considers embarrassing and distasteful about "coloured people" (such as her accent and her lower-class status), Harriet's father, the disciplinarian Mr. Cruickshank, does not reject Zulma, allowing her to sleep over. She is the means for the Canadian-born Harriet to become West Indian, long before Harriet accompanies her to Tobago. On their flight, the two teenagers' dreams crisscross. Through airplane travel from modernity to rurality, Harriet crosses, literally and metaphorically, into the West Indian landscape she has only heard about, but is about to experience.

I opened my eyes; Zulma was looking at me laughing.

"Is what you dreaming about?"

"You and your goat."

"Me too." We both cracked up. (149)

In their subconscious, travelling to Tobago is a literal and mental flight back to a place where

time has stood still; but Tobago—like the rest of the world—is coterminous with modernity. Neither is Harriet's travel to the Caribbean permanent: she will return to Canada. She remains a Canadian citizen. But the contact she makes with her West Indian roots is important for her understanding of the identity thrust on her both within her family and within Canadian society—a society that identifies her as a second-generation Caribbean immigrant, even though she was born in Canada.

Lacey of *For the Life of Laetitia*, who lives in the Caribbean, and Zulma of *Harriet's Daughter*, who opts to return there, have open-ended, fluid links to their mothers abroad that they can reestablish at any time. Both young adult novels posit that it is important for the young person of Caribbean heritage to learn to juggle a regional Caribbean identity with a composite diasporic one, and this idea is conveyed through the paradigm of travel and return.

So far I have discussed the issue of negotiating modernity from the point of view of the West Indian adolescent based in the metropolis, and shown her turmoil as she is forced to negotiate her dual identity as West Indian-Canadian. Through an examination of Harriet, I have also noted the quest of the young adult for identity completion and stabilization, and so the need to establish contact with West Indian cultural roots at home in the region.

For the West Indian adolescent who lives in the

Caribbean region, the need to negotiate modernity is no less important. Dabydeen's *Sometimes Hard* depicts this outward negotiation from the perspectives of Leroy Blue and Bumpin' Joe, two young adults whose lives are developed in parallel. It is useful to consider this reverse representation, since it gives insight into the comparative experience of the male adolescent of West Indian origin. Leroy and Bumpin' Joe are of similar rural, lower-class parentage, and they are both preparing to migrate from Trinidad to New York. Dabydeen portrays the young West Indians' journey outward into metropolitan modernity with resonances of turmoil similar to the journey back from the metropolis to the West Indies.

Leroy Blue's life is steeped in the brutalities of corporal punishment that are not very different from the GWID Harriet's father remembers from his "longtime" West Indian childhood. Leroy is constantly preoccupied with finding ways to escape the wrath of his mother, Martha the laundress, whom Dabydeen describes pejoratively as joyless and of "pig-black" hue (1). Since his biological father, Stan Blue, has run off, the village preacher has been trying to inveigle his mother into an affair. Meanwhile, Old Man Clear, the paraplegic village cobbler, plays the role of father figure and looks out for Leroy, as does the rest of the village. For years, Leroy's life has been suspended in a gaze outward to the Big Apple, where he is going to live with his maternal aunt.

He has been waiting for his migration documents to be regularized and the process has finally come to an end. His mother expects him to improve his lot and someday to return to Trinidad famous (54). Leroy is excited, but ambivalent about his impending departure. In fact, his fascination with the benevolent white woman Mrs. Simcoe from New York, is fuelled by his desire to know what is expected of him once he gets there.²

No information is given on Bumpin' Joe's family circumstances, but like Leroy, he is a spectator in his own life. What stands out most about his portrayal is his resemblance to Gilroy's description of the early twentieth-century African American minstrel performer ("... to be real" 14). His minstrelsy is encapsulated in his "long-time saga-boy" nickname and pan-man status.³ In addition, he is presented either as grimacing with the intensity of effort while playing his steel pan, or grinning, his "teeth showing white against his black face as he smile[s]" (61). The main person in his life is the steel-band leader, Seth Gardner, whose interest in him is similar to that of a surrogate father.

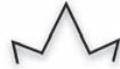
Bumpin' Joe is a prodigious steel-band player. His talent in the performing arts will allow him to move to New York, where he can become famous. The young boys of his community idolize him both for his prowess at playing the steel pan, and for the chance that it gives him to emigrate. He need only

impress the man who is coming to see him play at the Sylvester Ball—the man who is his West Indian connection to New York.

One finds out, though, that this man, Mr. Simcoe, is a failed Trinidadian musician who has returned from New York with his American wife. Mr. Simcoe is morose and uncommunicative, and the couple lives on the edge of town. Mrs. Simcoe, who has developed a motherly and advisory relationship with Leroy from his visits to deliver her washing, reveals snatches of her husband's history. It was her husband's music that attracted her to him in New York. Mr. Simcoe once played the trumpet and the steel pan, and it is implied that Mr. Simcoe's current anti-social behaviour is connected with his disappointments in New York.

Clearly, Mr. Simcoe's failure represents the unrealistic promise of the metropolis for the West Indian who does not have the savvy to make it. Leroy is acutely conscious of the possibility of his similar failure. This he projects onto his mirror image, Bumpin' Joe. And so, after chatting with Bumpin' Joe about going to New York, what it holds for their futures, and the importance of having West Indian

connections to be able to make it there, "Leroy only thought of his [Bumpin' Joe's] laughter . . . odd as this was, the way his mouth opened widely . . . and somehow Joe didn't seem like a famous person any more, not with the back of his mouth showing like



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that" (61). That night Leroy also has a dream in which he is walking down Fifth Avenue, surrounded by neon lights, skyscrapers, his wide-eyed, quaintly dressed West Indian family, and a waving and smiling Bumpin' Joe. He cannot, however, find Mrs. Simcoe, no matter how hard he looks for her. His inability to find his friend Mrs. Simcoe forewarns of problems such as racial divisions that he is likely to meet in New York.

As Leroy Blue's departure draws near, he looks at his airline ticket and his thoughts are revealed:

He vowed then to return to the island when the right time came. He thought, too, that when he grew up he would find out more why people left one place, for another; why Americans came to the islands in the first. Why some—like Mrs. Simcoe—never left once they were here. (166)

Indeed, the text includes a scene in which the boys broach the topic of being “famous right here” in Trinidad, but the conversation peters out (147). In an effort to reassure Leroy, Clear informs him that “West Indian culture is all over” (167).

All in all, although both Nourbese Philip and Dabydeen suggest that rootedness in a heritage identity is necessary for young people of West Indian parentage, West Indian life is not romanticized. Its slow pace, the agricultural setting, and the laid-back life that propels the ambitious to leave are depicted with candour. Thus, the relationship of West Indians with the regional home is presented as ambivalent. The hyphenated existence of having one foot in the old-world home and the other in metropolitan modernity is presented as ideal. This is the initiation that the characters in the young adult novels are conditioned to think of as the norm, whether their home is in the Caribbean or abroad. Moving from migration and how the adolescents in the texts negotiate modernity, I turn next to performativity in the equally prominent sphere of gender roles and relations.

Negotiating the Body as Transmigratory Space

In assessing the continuities of Caribbean womanhood in Toronto, Frances Henry cites the strong, long-suffering role of nurturer and caregiver that lower-class West Indian women play in their families. Although not all families are without fathers, they

often are; and within the Caribbean community, “[m]others are esteemed for their strength, bravery, and courage in bringing up children without the father’s help while at the same time providing the sole financial support for themselves and their children” (77). Henry points out that Caribbean women “feel that they are equal to men, but they recognize that they live under male domination.” She continues: “their most ardent desire is for greater independence” which they can gain with “economic independence” (61). Ironically, both in the Caribbean and in the diaspora, it is the strength that lower-class women show in defence of their children—a strength that they do not always summon in defence of themselves—that sometimes causes conflicts between them and their male partners.

Henry’s observations provide a context for viewing the negotiations of the adolescent female characters in the three texts, as they move towards reconstituting new gender roles. They do this, not always in full rejection of old roles, but with respect for their mothers who still perform them. For it is through their own agency, but not any less as a result of the painful bodily sacrifice of their mothers and other female adults, that West Indian female adolescents seek to chart new pathways.

The lower-class girl in the Caribbean is trained to do housework from a very young age, this role becoming only more regularized at puberty. These

roles are not a simple matter of doing household chores. Thus, as a rural peasant child in the Trinidad of the 1960s, Lacey in Merle Hodge's *For the Life of Laetitia* must look after her own kitchen plot. If she expects to eat, she must grow food. When her baby cousin Charlene arrives for the Christmas holidays, Lacey is expected to help "mind" her. So ingrained is this acceptance of performing ascribed female roles that, when she moves into her father's house in town, although she is only twelve, she takes her half-brother Michael in hand. She orders him to bathe, teaches him to make his bed, reads bedtime stories to him, and enforces strict rules as if he were her son.

Michael's fair-skinned, middle-class mother does not adopt this role in her own home. Dark-skinned West Indian women most often perform this caregiver-nurturer role. As Rosina Wiltshire-Brodber notes, colour is viewed as a "passport to improved status." She continues: "Putting milk in the coffee" by marrying someone of lighter complexion was a strategy which both Caribbean men and women understood very clearly. The coloured woman was anxious to differentiate herself from the black woman whom she perceived as being inferior in status (137). Thus, skin shade, as it relates to class, helps determine what roles girls play in the West Indian female line-up. The legacy of apprenticeship to housework, though less stringent, is carried over into the metropolitan diaspora, as is evident in

Harriet's Daughter. In Canada, where mothers shield their daughters from the rigours of the domestic employment in which they themselves engage, colour is less of a determinant in the assignation of menial roles. The depiction of Jo-Ann, Harriet's sister who is dark-skinned, supports this observation.

By comparison, for the Indo-Caribbean girl from peasant stock, the performance of the adult female role is even more stringent. As Shameen Ali writes, historically, East Indian women from peasant households were expected to marry early, the view on schooling being that it would go to waste, since the girl was expected to go to another man's family, where her duties would be to "cook, wash and keep the house" (80–82). As Anjaneer Jugmohansingh, Lacey's rural classmate and friend in *For the Life of Laetitia*, explains: "I washing their clothes since I eight years old!" (170). Anjaneer sells produce from her garden to earn money to travel to school.⁴ The omniscient narrator reports that Anjaneer's elder brother makes "a terrible scene" at her request for money to travel to get an education:

He told her would break her foot if that was the only way to make her stay home and do her work. She was out of the house all day, going out early, early in the morning and reaching home near nighttime, leaving her mother to do the work. Why should he waste his good money sending

her to any *high school*, for she was high enough already and in fact a little too high with herself. She was a girl and already knew everything a girl needed to know. Why would she want to know more than her mother? (63–64)

For an Afro-Trinidadian girl like Lacey, however, the situation is quite different. Relatives exhort her to excel at school as a way out of domestic servitude.

By contrast, adolescent males are not assigned fixed responsibilities of home or hearth. In “Male Privileging and Male ‘Academic Underperformance’ in Jamaica,” Mark Figueroa argues that it is this entrenched West Indian socialization of “tie the heifer and loose the bull” that has led to the lack of discipline, stamina, and commitment manifesting in “male academic underperformance” in the late twentieth-century Caribbean (137–66). In disputing the “male marginalization” theory, which has tended sometimes to put the fading profile of males at the door of girls and women, Figueroa outlines some noticeable freedoms in the acculturation of West Indian males. Since these are evident in the three young adult novels under discussion, I cite from Figueroa’s sociological gender study:

Thus boys may not receive the more subtle training in self-discipline that girls get in school, but when they play true to form and get far out

of line there is an attempt to literally beat them back into shape. Boys therefore lose on two sides. First, they do not get the training in self-discipline necessary for academic success. Second, school becomes an uncomfortable place where they have to suffer the tedium of sitting still for most of the day when much of their previous training was in running up and down. When they behave in ways consistent with their earlier training they are often abused. Both of these disadvantages faced by boys can be traced back to the historic privileging of the male gender, insofar as the school draws on the skills children learn in the private (female) sphere rather than the public (male) sphere. (151)

Figueroa goes on to note that “the point has even been reached now where families are effectively saying that they prefer girls to boys” (150).

Scandalized to find his eight-year-old son Michael in the kitchen washing dishes—a task to which Lacey has set him—Lacey’s father, Mr. Cephas, becomes abusive toward his wife. According to the father, housework will shape his son into a “cunumunu”—a man who cannot rule his own home (84). Mr. Cephas comes home mainly to eat and to sleep, and this is a role his young son adopts, dropping his book bag at home each day after school and disappearing until near nighttime, when he is prepared to go to bed

unwashed, unless Lacey commands him to take a bath. His father shows an interest in his schooling only when he brings home a poor report card. This is followed by temporary enforced study and abuse.

Even the much brutalized Leroy of *Sometimes Hard* performs one main chore that allows him great latitude to roam: he delivers laundry to Mrs. Simcoe from New York. Men also cover up the escapades of boys. For instance, when Leroy disappears on his excursion to town to find his father, Mr. Yardley the village policeman, who eventually finds out where Leroy has been, suggests that he lie to his mother, and they both keep it a secret. These patterns of male socialization are quite similar in the diaspora, though not as expansively drawn. In *Harriet's Daughter*, Harriet complains that her brother Jonathon is exempt from washing up because he is a boy. Particular about his grooming, and encouraged to develop the profile of a "sweet man," he drives his father's car.

It is these differentiated gender roles Lacey, Anjane, and Harriet seek to renegotiate as lower-class female adolescents. Further, they understand that education is the main passport to achieving reconstituted identities. When Anjane is blocked from going to school, she proclaims: "I *not* going to end up like my mother, I rather dead" (64). Eventually, she crumbles under the burden and commits suicide. For her part, Harriet intends to break the middle-class-Black-Barbie-Doll image that her sister Jo-Ann

so easily adopts. She goes underground, opting instead to assume the identity of Harriet Tubman, the Black American female liberator. Her adoption of the identity of an African American icon is not as strange as it may seem. For in their struggles in the metropolis, Blacks in the diaspora identify with Black liberation across nationalities, a point that will be developed in my discussion of West Indian cultural practices in the metropolis in the section that follows.

Negotiating Totems of West Indian Culture

Frances Henry cites some of the West Indian cultural practices that survive into the Toronto diaspora, among them religious affiliations and community activities such as Rastafarianism and Carnival, which is celebrated as Caribana (148–81). These revitalizing and regenerating pursuits provide support, reduce alienation, and strengthen West Indian ties, breaking down insularity and class pretensions. Further, they are done with adolescents as full witnesses and legatees. Adolescent Harriet points to two of these retentions: (1) the male pastime of playing dominoes (in which her father, who rejects Black culture, clandestinely participates and for which she calls him a phony), and (2) the saving plan the women maintain, called the partners' scheme. It is this partners' scheme that provides the money for Zulma and Harriet's travel to the Caribbean.

There are other emblems of cultural negotiation

evoked in *Harriet's Daughter*, all of which are identity based. For example, for the entire novel the main character, Margaret, wages a psychological battle within her family to change her name to the more meaningful "Harriet," after the African American liberator Harriet Tubman. It is significant that she assumes her Harriet identity at about the same time that her father denounces the West Indian theme of reggae music and Rastafarianism that she chooses for her school research project.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* provides a context for Harriet's choice of identity from the African American canon. In his chapter, "Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity," Gilroy notes how the African American cultural ethos has formed a "connective culture" within the modern Black diaspora, not only through music such as hip-hop (which is a convergence of Jamaican Caribbean and African American youth expression), but also through political statements emanating from the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power (82). Cecil Foster and Rinaldo Walcott discuss this borrowing from African American culture, expressing their belief in a Black-diasporic connectivity as part of what Walcott terms "the invention of a grammar for black in Canada . . . against erasure" of white normativity (148). These borrowings of cultural identity are unconstrained by questions of national boundaries, since the legacy of a similar slave history, resistance, and mainland-

to-island resale and exile of forebears connects the majority of Blacks in the New World.

Nourbese Philip does not problematize Harriet's adoption of an African American role-self. In having Harriet state her preference for the racial ascription "Black" rather than "coloured," she invests Harriet with a pan-African identity arising from a commonality of history, heritage, and experience of the diaspora that goes beyond divisive platforms such as nationality and skin-shade.

Eventually Margaret succeeds in getting her schoolmates and the females in her family to address her as Harriet. The plot of the novel is a series of enactments of Underground Railroad escapes that become more than serial after-school games. Children walk the streets in roles as slave-owners, tracker dogs, and slaves, trying to outwit and catch each other. Under Harriet's leadership, the slaves manage to make it to the safe-house every time. Infighting breaks out when the leader of the slave-owners gets tired of being outwitted. The peeved slave-owner, who is jealous of Harriet's relationship with Zulma, one of the slaves, reports to the school administration and parents. Margaret Cruickshank, a.k.a. Harriet Tubman, finally gets caught, but by this time she is so engrossed in her role that she is unable to separate role-self from real-self. Thus, Harriet chooses, from quite early and even as role play, to align her identity with cultural models of resistance and liberation.

The more common cultural shapers of West Indian adolescent identity both in the region and in the diaspora, however, are the triumvirate of (1) education, (2) strict discipline, especially for girls, and (3) strengthening exposure to hard life. The effects of the latter two, in the form of GWID, on Harriet's life in Canada have already been shown as the reason for the conflict between herself and her father. With regard to *For the Life of Laetitia* and *Sometimes Hard*, the corporal punishment meted out to Leroy Blue and the rigid attention to housework on equal terms with adults that is demanded of Anjane Jugmohansigh and Lacey are examples of the importance of strict discipline and the strengthening exposure to hard life in the shaping of these young adults.

But the effect of education on the lives of young adults needs to be further discussed for its make-or-break effect on the lives of young adults, especially in the Caribbean. For this I turn to an examination of Hodge's *For the Life of Laetitia*. Hodge exposes how the brutalities associated with West Indian education continue for the bright, lower-class child, who wins a



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scholarship to secondary school during the period of the 1960s to the 1980s. Through the fortunes of Lacey and her friends, Hodge also depicts how lower-class children negotiate middle-class, colonial grammar-school environments to protect their identities from being squashed.

In *For the Life of Laetitia*, the relationship between performance and the process of schooling is reflected in the fact that the final result—the examination outcome, the one day of glory—is the point of focus. Children who shine enter the hall of scholarship fame, while the unsuccessful seek avenues of escape from second-class status. Great ceremony attends Lacey's educational performance: her name gets into the national newspapers; her father, Mr. Cephas, who never recognized her before, takes the new star to live with him; Lacey is driven off in style to another stage of schooling; Mr. Cephas invites his friends over to celebrate and parades her before them; and new uniforms are bought. Pictures are taken to be sent to Mammy Patsy in New York. The new star revels in the accolades. Of her journey back home after her first two weeks in town, Lacey records, "I

called out greetings to houses along the way, feeling proud when people looked out and saw me in my uniform" (58).

But the true nature of Lacey's stardom is hollow, alienating her from her roots. She longs to be in constant touch with rural Sooklal Trace, Balatier. She would also like not to have to keep up the performance. Perform she must, however, not only to lift herself and her family out of poverty, but also to make her mother's delayed education in New York worth the sacrifice. Finding that she has to perform mainly for the gratification of adults, Lacey resorts to trying to frustrate the system. She withdraws her performance at will: she can get 100% in Mathematics one day and the next day she gets 0. The problem, however, is that she also needs education for her own advancement, since the value placed on it in her society is so great that it has the power to make her a person or a non-person. Since education is her main platform for self-actualization, the dilemma for Lacey is how to control the beast of colonial education and also claim an identity for herself within it.

By comparison with the female, how does the male lower-class child deal with the dislocations that the much revered West Indian education presents? One route that the male takes is that of Marlon Peters, one of Lacey's male classmates. His way of negotiating with an oppressive education system is through mimicry and clown performance. At the

class Christmas party, he parodies their tormentor, the red-skinned Miss Lopez, a.k.a. Circus Horse:

Marlon Peters and his gang put on a little play about the school His face was heavily powdered with flour, and he had smeared bright red lipstick on his mouth and cheeks. . . . Marlon Peters wobbled in on tall-heeled, pointed shoes, with his nose in the air, carrying some exercise books. "Take allyu old nasty books and get away from e! Allyu have no right in here—your head too hard, you too dunce, you too ugly, you too black, you have no manners, you have no parents. I don't even want to see allyu. I am going for the principal!" (131–32)

Male child protagonists in these West Indian texts rarely confront the system directly. Perhaps, as Mark Figueroa suggests, the risk to their machismo is too large, and their acculturation does not give them the required stamina; thus they have too much to lose in open confrontation.

By contrast, female protagonists try to overthrow, manipulate, or at the very least, to be co-authors of the roles they perform. Unlike the males, the females lead a frontal attack on the attempts of the education system to erode their identities and inflict on them a status prescribed by the traditional class hierarchy. For example, Lacey rebels openly in defence of her

beleaguered classmates on countless occasions, and when she can take no more, eventually curses the Circus Horse, for which she is suspended from school.

Rebelling against the middle-class superstructure—one alternative to mimicry—requires stamina. The female spirits do not die in the clash, but their wry triumph is recorded in defeated bodies. As depicted in Lacey's nervous breakdown, and Anjaneé's torture at the hands of Miss Lopez, the personal cost of this confrontational route is overwhelming. Furthermore, future dealings with the structure require some degree of acquiescence. In the end, Lacey wins the right to keep in touch with her roots; she will go to secondary school from Sooklal Trace, Balatier, but at the expense of a nervous breakdown. Anjaneé, who has a double fight on her hands with her family and Miss Lopez, and does not intend to succumb to either, kills herself.

Needless to say, these fictive portrayals of resistance are no less valid for seeming inevitably doomed. In fact, the trauma experienced by adolescents as they come into conflict with prescribed cultural roles at the onset of adulthood is universal. My point, however, is that three young adult novels written by authors from different sites within the West Indian diaspora speak to each other in their comparative representations of how young adolescents of West Indian parentage deal with the roles they are required

to perform. As a totem, West Indian education continues to hold pride of place and is a constant arena of negotiation for young adults, both in the region and in the diaspora.

Negotiating Creole Language And Other Empowering Speech Acts

In discussing "the politics of performativity" in the work of two West Indian-Canadian female writers, Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand (both incidentally from Trinidad and Tobago), Rinaldo Walcott explores how "[b]lack language works as both a method of renewal and as a link to a historical past that binds diasporic people within fluid communities" (95, 110). Walcott believes that

thinking through the politics of black language can move [Blacks] beyond what Diawara calls "oppression studies" (the study of racism and exclusion) to performative studies (the study of how black folk remake themselves and in the process remake entire societies. (110)

He concludes that "black language brings into being the politics for reinventing the self and resisting domination simultaneously" (115). For her part, in "Managing the Unmanageable," Nourbese Philip writes of her own struggles to find her tongue amid the language of domination:

The challenge for me was to use that language, albeit the language of my oppression, but the only one I had, to subvert the inner and hidden discourse—the discourse of my non-being. (296)

Both Walcott's and Nourbese Philip's perspectives frame the speech acts that the adolescent protagonist of *Harriet's Daughter* employs. The West Indian-Canadian entering adulthood in a society that harbours negative perceptions of her as Black, minority, and immigrant must develop a strong sense of self if she is to achieve fulfillment of her potential as a human being and a citizen. As Frances Henry observes in discussing "the educational experiences of Caribbean youth," one of the places in which young people of school age find "a localized sense of identity and solidarity" is in "their own language" (142–44). In a sense, being is talking; and being Black is talking Black, since for many Caribbean students, in coming to Canada "a growing awareness of identity" that equates with a "positive identification of being Black" (Henry 260) accrues.

Harriet is no migrant; yet it is in this context that she "tries her tongue" at a variety of language forms in the process of her identity formation.⁵ She already speaks Canadian Standard English, but she wants to learn West Indian Creole, which her Barbadian father does not allow at home, and also to learn a response to deal with the racism that she knows she

will encounter in adulthood. And so for her, using language becomes both a personal and a political act. She is a good example of Toni Morrison's "we do language" and Judith Butler's "*speaking is itself a bodily act*" (*Excitable Speech* 10). Harriet uses language for the interpellation of the identities that are submerged in her. But as Butler indicates, language involves more than just self-interpellation; one's existence operates within social definition:

Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible. (5)

Harriet's interest in West Indian Creole is deliberate (although in my view this interest is painted in a heavily exoticized hand).⁶ Harriet needs to know the basics of the legacy which identifies her and determines the extent and quality of her citizenship. She also needs to know Creole in a defensive way as an insiders' tongue; but beyond this, she needs to know the language because of its value as a strengthening feature of familial and ancestral self-identification. Therefore, she sets about learning West Indian Creole from Zulma, because language is identity; and she is ignorant of certain aspects of her identity, by being Canadian-born. She can

only learn this language outside the home, though, for while her mother code-switches from Canadian Standard to Jamaican Creole with her friends over the phone, her mother “likes to pretend she doesn’t know how to [speak Creole]; she thinks it’s better to sound like a Canadian” (10). As for her father, Creole would certainly be on the list of unmentionables that he considers “a disgrace to black people” (14). Thus, to reconstitute the loss that has taken place across oceans and time, *Harriet’s Daughter* reifies the performance of West Indian speech acts.

It must be pointed out, however, that the novels present learning to speak Creole as far more than merely learning the exotic features of language. In fact, there is no one Creole. Zulma speaks Tobagonian Creole, Harriet’s mother speaks Jamaican Creole on the phone to her friends, and her father, who is Barbadian, has suppressed his Barbadian Creole. Creole is used in the texts to convey the cultural experience, preparation, identity, and resilience that the young person of West Indian parentage needs to face the wider world.

Another of Harriet’s deliberate speech acts is swearing. She rationalizes it in this way when her mother grounds her:

“Look Mum, if someone calls you a name like nigger, what d’you want me to do? Say excuse me, you shouldn’t say that? No way, I tell them

exactly where to go,” and when I tell her where that is, she gets pissed off with me and sends me to my room. (14)

Harriet is trying to find valid ways to deal with racism in a white society. She is also building courage and a defence to deal with those who would erode her identity as a Black person. For, as Butler notes, people call themselves into being and are called into being, but they can also abjure injurious language from “the other”:

One is not simply fixed by the name that one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well. . . . [T]he injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but may also produce an unexpected and enabling response. If to be addressed is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call. (*Excitable Speech* 2)

Nourbese Philip does not simplify the task of formulating an identity for her adolescent character. At the end of the text, Harriet’s process of self-exploration continues, notably, with her impending immersion into the Caribbean region. But much

“unexpected and enabling response” has come from her rebuttal of a name she rejects during the course of the novel. She has found out that identity-formation is not as simple as a name-change. Yet, she is closer to liberating herself from the “Margaret” that her father has imposed on her, and adopting the brave, Black, and socially conscious “Harriet” she would like to claim.

In *For the Life of Laetitia*, the need to reject “the injurious address” is similar, but, unlike Harriet’s, the language that Lacey summons in her defence is no play-acting. The political cut-and-thrust of speech acts erupts in the open classroom, as adolescents protect their identities from erasure in a race-and-class war. Lacey realizes that a loss of her cultural voice will redound to her disempowerment. She refuses to be silenced and, under pressure, brings both Creole and curse to her defence, creating spectacles in the classroom that shock and make her middle-class tormentor back off. Although she has fallen afoul of school etiquette and her own standards of respect for a teacher, the scales tip in her favour, allowing her to reposition herself in the colonial power structure of secondary school. Her Creole voice is an instinctive defence, an alterity that can be summoned in times of personal invasion. Further, her performances bond all the children looking on in the classroom into a powerful group.

Another way in which the young people in *For*

the Life of Laetitia negotiate the politics of language is by lampooning the system that threatens to disempower them. Lacey adopts Ma’s name for Miss Lopez—Miss Lopez remains Circus Horse to the end of the book, and her power to hurt is turned on her and defused. Thus, the young adults gain strength from group bonding to renew their self-esteem and protect themselves from her continual verbal assaults. Additionally, the calypso art form used to rebut social wrongs, as alluded to in the composition of Charmaine Springer (Lady Reporter) in the text, can be put alongside (1) parody, (2) Creole language, and (3) swearing, as speech acts that students from the lower-class use to prevent their identities from being erased—in the name of education—by middle-class domination.

Writing West Indian Childhood into the 21st Century: West Indian Authorship in a Changing Caribbean

If the three young adult novels dealt with in this paper seem ideologically heavy-handed, reasons lie in the particular social history surrounding the development of Caribbean children’s literature and Caribbean society as a postcolonial society on the whole. First of all, Caribbean children’s literature has a very short history, dating back to the 1950s, beginning in didacticism and literacy drives with folktales in basic readers (James 166). Most of the literature to date targets pre-adolescents. Among

literature for young adults, while Rosa Guy's *Friends* of 1973, which deals with the similar issue of West Indian adjustment to metropolitan migration, is a landmark novel, *Harriet's Daughter* of 1988 can be considered to be the beginning of a body of work that has been growing steadily since the 1990s.

Another factor that can be attributed to the ideological flavour of these young adult novels is that their authors, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Merle Hodge, and Cyril Dabydeen are established postcolonial writers who write primarily for adult audiences. Themes such as poverty, resistance, migration, language contestation, and racism, which imbue their adult work, are visible with equal vigour in their young adult texts. Added to this is the fact that most West Indians feel that West Indian childhood, however harsh it may seem to other cultures, is a strengthening preparation for the rigours of postcolonialism that their children are likely to face as adults, whether they live within the region or abroad as adults.

For writers in the metropolitan West Indian

diaspora such as Nourbese Philip and Dabydeen, who are dependent on memories of the old parent society for depictions of childhood for their young adult fiction, sometimes nostalgia complicates these representations. Yet these representations are



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not obsolete; for it is a fact that, within the region itself, modernity has not touched every one in the same way; and so the mores of many parts of contemporary Caribbean society are little different from how the authors remember them from their own growing years.

Harriet's Daughter, *For the Life of Laetitia*, and *Sometimes Hard* are no less young adult fiction for not embodying the ideologies of children's

literature of dominant cultures in their craftsmanship or in their themes. The tensions they illuminate on the issues of migration to modernity from regional rurality, West Indian gender roles, Creole and English language, and children's adjustments to established West Indian child-rearing practices, indisputably delineate performativity in West Indian childhood over oceans and time.

In this paper I have focused on the main char-

acters—those who wrestle with the identities mapped out for them. But those who buy into the system to keep the peace are also performers. Harriet’s siblings, Jo-Ann and Jonathon, play the game that society and their father prescribe. Theirs are by no means less important or less interesting performances.

West Indian society is replete with metaphors of role playing, which are imbibed from cradle to

grave. In children’s literature of the realistic genre, childhood is depicted as a balancing act. Particularly in the treatment of the theme of “home and away,” survival depends on how well young protagonists can shift roles in imagination and in reality to fit the variable that constitutes home. This scenario applies as much for those who have migrated as for those who live in the Caribbean region.

Notes

¹ In this paper “West Indian” refers particularly to the territories of the English-speaking Caribbean. However, issues dealt with are significant to the wider Caribbean.

² Governor Simcoe passed a law abolishing slavery for slaves escaping into Canada through the Underground Railroad. The name “Simcoe” provides intertextuality with *Harriet’s Daughter* through Harriet Tubman of the Underground Railroad.

³ The name “Bumpin’ Joe” is emblematic of the warriorhood days of the Trinidad steel band. To “bump,” a slang word of the 1960s, is to walk in exaggerated, Bad-John style. It is one of the hallmarks of the ne’er do well, unemployed, and uneducated youth.

⁴ Although scenes depicted are of contemporary relevance in 2007, *For the Life of Laetitia* depicts the Trinidad of the 1960s and 1970s. It is less common in the West Indies of the twenty-first century that children would have to travel so far to go to a

secondary school. Additionally, Indo-Trinidadian attitudes toward education for girls have changed over time. All the same, given differences in economic circumstances from family to family, these changes are not absolutes; many of the depictions still hold true.

⁵ This is a reference to the title of Nourbese Philip’s poetry collection, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed, 1988).

⁶ I feel that Nourbese Philip gives Zulma far too much responsibility for the language ideology of the text. She places Zulma under Harriet’s protection and agency, but this is not enough to reconcile the image of the girl found crying in the playfield at being teased by a gang of schoolchildren with the feisty one who later says: “Me? Never! Me never going lose me accent. I’s e a Tobagonian and I’s e proud of it” (10). Harriet’s explanation that Zulma hangs on to her accent because perhaps she feels that “sounding less Tobagonian might mean she was growing away

from her gran and Tobago" (11) is unconvincing. Zulma's speech seems exoticized, especially since her initial reaction to Harriet's desire to learn Tobagonian Creole is, "Is what you want to talk like that for? You speak nice already" (10).

Also, the emphasis that Harriet places on skin-shade and hair features weakens her as a character. The exoticizing of Zulma's skin colour is a way of "performing Blackness" and is sometimes

very heavy-handed, as can be noted in the following excerpt:

One day though, I even got Mum to braid my hair and Zulma's—we were like two African princesses, except my skin wasn't dark enough. I wish I had Zulma's kind of dark black skin, it's just like velvet, and with her long braids—ooh she was beautiful . . . (15)

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