

## Spider Webs: Intersectionality & My Transnational Identity

*Wombanist Views*

*Wah?*

*Yea daddy, dats da name of de show.*

*Oh ok den. Yuh always ave' different tings gwan wit yuh.*

I can remember this attempt at having a conversation with my West Indian father about *Wombanist Views*, a radio show that I had created. I rarely discuss any of my personal endeavors or accomplishments with my family, but I was particularly excited about this opportunity, and the chance to openly discuss the fact that I self-identified as a Womanist. See, the topics of womanism, feminism, patriarchy, and women's rights were one's that are not discussed or mentioned in my family, or within the cultures that I was raised. When noticing the book, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide To Why Feminism Matters* on my desk, my teenage sister wrinkled up her nose and then shared that, she could "kind of understand the things that **those** feminists are saying, but she sees nothing wrong with having men opening doors for you, and stuff like that". Clearly, she does not understand feminism, and remains oblivious to the fact that her older sister was one of **those** people that she spoke of. So, yes, mentioning this show to my father was an important step for me, in trying to reveal hidden parts of my identity to my family.

### Identity Complexities

My identity is a complex Tri-cultural identity. I come from a working class immigrant background. I am Black, but not Black American, and often find myself dealing with intra-racial strife, and being called a "coconut", or being told that I am not "Black", because my ancestors did not experience slavery in the American south. Never mind the fact that the majority of the enslaved Black Africans who were brought across the Atlantic in the bowels of slave ships, never made it to the shores of North America. No, they -- my ancestors were taken to the Caribbean and Latin America. Adding another dimension to my identity is the fact that my step father and step family of over 20 years are West African, Ghanaian to be exact, and thus I have been exposed to and immersed in that culture as well. Our holiday meals involves mixing our cultural dishes -- jollof rice, fried plantain, peas and rice, salt fish & fungi, and more with traditional American dishes. Finally, I reside in Los Angeles California, what is considered to be the liberal West Coast, and a bastion for racial and ethnic harmony. However, I know that is nothing more than a myth of a racial utopia. After all this is the city that played host to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, neighborhoods continue to exhibit racial segregation, and the death of 15 years old Natasha Harland, reminded us all, that young Black girls were (and continue to be) viewed as a great danger and formidable threat, even when they are unarmed. Yet, the part that stung most about her death, was that her life was deemed to have such little value, that her murder was given probation, a mere tap on the wrist.

This represents the foundation of my transnational and tri-cultural identity. Sometimes I do not even need to open my mouth, and people (including other Black people) will readily approach and ask me "where I'm from", again reminding me that my identity is that of a foreigner, and

when I do speak, my accent often betrays me. Even when I think that I have perfectly masked it. I actually envision myself as a Master Code-Switcher, capable of shifting from Caribbean patois, Black American ebonics, to Standard American and professional English within seconds, and without given it much thought. Briefly, code-switching is a type of bilingualism and an acquired skill that is used to traverse different environments through language (or codes). When we speak in one manner with our family, and another around friends, and still again switch to another set of codes with our co-workers, we are code-switching.

I have often reflected on the other dimensions of my identity and how they influenced my discovery and approach to feminism. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word identity as, “*the qualities, beliefs, etc. that makes a particular person or group different from others*”. In looking at the various and intersecting factors that have helped to shape my identity, I can certainly appreciate this definition. One’s identity is personal, unique, multifaceted, and dynamic. I consider the varying aspects that help to form my identity and realize that they form an overlapping web, or look like the intricate patterns of a snowflake, and in both cases, no two are ever alike, and I believe that realizing this is key when considering the various feminists identities; whether transnational, post-colonial, queer, or women of color. Despite the similarities in appearance and identities, there is a wealth of individual experiences for those who identify with any of these sub-groups. For instance, we can speak of women of color as a broad and inclusive category, but we should not ignore how differences in attitudes, experiences, and historical events impact the lives of these women differently. Observations should be made on whether being labeled members of a “model minority” insulates Asian American women from the types of discrimination that Black and Hispanic women are subjected to, and when considering the experiences of Hispanic women, the plight of Afro-Latinas should be recognized as a distinctive part of the Latino experience that must not be ignored.

### **Transnational Caribbean Identity**

Therefore, being a Black woman, of Caribbean/immigrant background forms the foundation of my identity as a transnational, women of color, and womanist. A Caribbean identity is truly transnational, as the Caribbean region has characteristically been one of constant migration, and the growing number of Caribbean people moving to the United States, Canada, and Europe, helped to create a Caribbean Diaspora. Thus, the Caribbean Diaspora consists of those living in the region, native born and living abroad, as well as first and second generations; who remain deeply rooted in Caribbean culture, and had an understanding of social norms, traditions, as well as the patriarchal dominance in society and politics. (Charleswell, 2013) For first-and-second generation offspring living outside of the region, there is a great demand to stay rooted in the Caribbean culture, and Caribbean parents often are quite strict with their children, in order to prevent assimilation (Baptiste, Hardy, & Lewis, 1997).

It is my experiences with gender oppression and the hypocritical expectations of decency that are placed on women within this Caribbean culture that began my own feminist awakening. Within this culture, a female child, particularly the oldest, as I am, is expected to help around the household (Brown & Johnson, 2008), and are instructed early on, on how she must carry herself, take care of the home, constantly tend to others, and mostly importantly behave. While the oldest daughter is also expected to take on the mother’s role when needed (Lopez, 2002), the boys are

given fewer and fewer chores, and are allowed to drift away from the home and what is deemed as “girls” work (Brown & Johnson, 2008). My own protest against this gender inequality was of course silenced, and I fell into the role of a surrogate mother to my younger siblings and cousins, which entail bathing, feeding, supervising, and cleaning up behind them, while my older brother was able to live a more carefree life. My outrage over the inequality in gender dynamics only hastened my discovery of feminism.

In her highly acclaimed poem, *Girl*, Antiguan poet, author, and professor, Jamaica Kincaid provides examples of the instructions given from mother to daughter that are constantly barked at young Caribbean girls, to ensure that they become virtuous Caribbean women. The mother provides such instructions:

*On Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming;*

*don't sing benna in Sunday school;*

*you mustn't speak to wharf-rat-boys, not even to give directions;*

*you don't eat fruits on the street - flies will follow you;*

*this is how you make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on;*

*this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and to*

*prevent yourself from looking like the slut that you are so bent on becoming;*

*this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease;*

*this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest;*

*this is how you set a table for lunch;*

*this is how you set a table for breakfast;*

*this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well,*

*and this is way they won't recognize immediately the slut that I have warned you against becoming;*

(Kincaid, 1983)

To those who have not grown up within the culture, the instructions and the choices of words seem extremely harsh, but for those deeply rooted in the Caribbean Diaspora, they are typical, and express the patriarchal nature of the region. Women and girls are expected to uphold morality, and it is an immoral woman that would cause a man to act on his innate sexual desires. For this reason, incidents discussing rape and even attempts at rape, often involve placing the blame for the assault on the woman or girl, who was dressed a certain way, lead a man on, or re accused of *going on too wotless* or *slack*. Throughout the greater Caribbean the two terms are interchangeable. Slackness may be described as sexually explicit lyrics, performances, and dance routines that outrage the middle class and the older generation..." (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001, p.151) My emerging feminist sensibilities cause me to question such notions. At a young age I embraced and celebrated female dancehall and soca artists, such as Patra, Alison Hinds, Destra, and Lady Saw, the Queen of Slackness, because I view their music, as a means to claim ownership over one's body and sexuality. Having a woman sing about her enjoyment of sex, as well as boast about the beauty of her feminine form, and how she could skillfully manuevar it on and off the dancefloor, seemed empowering to me. So, much so that I proudly exclaim that I too,

am wotless, and soca band Kes the Band of Trinidad, 2013 hit song *Wotless*, greatly explains the above sentiments of freedom:

*You wanna talk.  
Talk bout this  
When ah wine,  
you go talk bout dat  
When ah getting on you go,  
talk bout dis  
Call yuh friends and den,  
Talk bout dat  
Down south dey go,  
Talk bout dis  
Up town dey done,  
Talk bout dat*

*You  
**I dont care what you say***

*Cuz, right now I just Wotless  
And I dont really careless  
Meh girlfriend she go get vex  
Meh family go send text  
But I dont care Ah Wotless  
Dey say ah moving breathless  
But I dont really careless,  
**Dis year ah moving fearless***

*Tell dem call meh name  
I go take de blame  
Tell dem call meh name  
I go take d blame  
Cuz right now I just wotless*

### **Rape Culture in the Caribbean Diaspora**

Still, rape culture remains very much prevalent in the Caribbean, and a social media campaign *Walking Into Walls*, started in 2012, catalogs much of these cases throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, and again, in reading through the news reports, court documents, and comments reflecting public opinion, it is clear that within the culture, women continue to be placed at fault for the acts of sexual and gender violence. Again, at a young age, I began to internalize all of this. By the time that I was nine years old puberty had begun to take its toll, filling in my body, and I remember my aunt calling me into my grandmother's home in order to put on "more proper clothing". See, I was playing with the other children outside in biker shorts and a crop top, and the spandex material was gripping my burgeoning curves, and attracting the attention of the older boys and even that of the adult men. My compromise was to go inside and change into a long t-shirt that would cover my bottom and not cling to my body. Still, the burden of respectability

was placed on me, an adolescent child, and not the teenage or adult men who should have been openly chastised for looking at an under-age girl in such a manner.

Part of my transnational Caribbean identity was realizing that these expectations were placed on me, and even now that I openly identify as a Womanist, I realize that the cultural programming that I received during my upbringing still impacts my own attitudes, even when I know that they are sexist. While I say to my nieces, “ayuh sit proper an close dem legs”, I have never voiced such instructions to my god son. My nieces are not left to play freely; instead they **must** have shorts on beneath all skirts and dresses. Perhaps it is not that I want to place the burden of respectability on them, as it has been placed on many generations of Caribbean women, perhaps I am subconsciously and constantly barking these orders, because I do realize that they may be harmed, may be sexually assaulted, and will likely take full blame for what was done to them.

This heightened sense of concern is justified when I consider the women in my own family who have been raped (and yes all were deemed to be at fault for what happened to them). In fact, a multicounty study in the Caribbean found that nearly half of the sexually active adolescent women reported that their first sexual encounter was forced (Halcon, Beuhring, Blum, 2000). While a report by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, found that all Caribbean countries (where comparable data was available) have higher than the global average for rape, and three Caribbean countries were actually among the top 10 for reported incidences of rape (UNGEEW, 2007) Statistics such as these seem to legitimize the preoccupation with the perceived virtue and whereabouts of young women within the Caribbean Diaspora. It is a failed response to addressing rape culture that is embedded in these post-colonial patriarchal societies. Here, men are not explicitly told not to rape, instead they have been traditionally told the “type” of women who should not be raped. However, the reality is that women and girls from all walks of life are indeed raped.

In essence, the root problem is not addressed, and that is confronting the notion that women’s bodies remain colonized spaces, where men have ownership over them, and thus the right to initiate a sexual encounter without a woman’s consent. A 2012 Carnival Road March song, *Kick In She Back Door*, performed by veteran soca band Burning Flames, emerged as the most popular song in Antigua carnival, and its popularity quickly spread throughout the greater Caribbean Diaspora. The song stands as evidence of the continued and persistent gender inequality and violence in the Caribbean region. In short, the song endorses anal rape of women and it conceives heterosexual relations as an adversarial competition in which men, through the use of sexual violence, righting emerges as winners (Red for Gender, 2012). The lyrics, an excerpt of which follows, basically put forth the logic that a woman who refuses to consent to vaginal sex, should be punished through anal rape, or “*Kicking in her back door*”:

*If she front door lock and you can’t get in*

*And she bathroom window lock*

*And you can’t get in*

*And she bedroom window lock*

*And you can’t get in*

*And she kitchen window lock*

*And you can’t get in*

*What to do?*

*Kick in she back door*

*Kick in she back door*

*What ah mean?*

*Kick um in*

*And she bawling murder*

*[more screaming]*

### **The Spider web**

My identity as a Black woman of Caribbean/immigrant background again laid the foundation for my transnational identity as a womanist. I found feminism to be limiting and exclusionary, especially when considering its greatest critique that Western feminism has a tendency “to conflate the experiences of Western (white) women with those of women everywhere, thus ignoring important differences and undermining the possibility of global feminist cooperation based on the multiple realities of the world’s women. Thus, instead I found womanism, to be more inclusive, even more so than Black Feminist Thought, and applicable to my need to identify, call out, discuss, and address all levels of oppression that I experience as a woman of color having a transnational identity. In comparison with feminism, the theory is much deeper, and attempts to address the multi-layered factors that bring about gender inequality and disrupts social harmony (Charleswell, 2013).

Building on this foundation are my varying sub-identities: working class, brown-skin/dark-skin brown woman, natural hair, spiritual not religious, tall, STEM educational background, millennial, social justice activist, which intersect and help to shape others impressions of me, and thus impact the type of interactions and experiences that I have. As critical legal theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw pointed out when she coined the term intersectionality, it is these very factors, that shape the multiple dimensions of a woman’s experience, particularly Black women. (Kimberle Crenshaw, 1993)

A closer examination of these sub-identities and how they have shaped my experiences:

#### *Brown-skin/Dark-brown skin*

Ever since the enactment of the one-drop rule, American society has been obsessed not only with race, but also skin tone and complexion. As the system of slavery persisted, skin tone was believed to be utilized as a weapon of control, in that dividing enslaved laborers into distinct groups, based on skin tone, helped to ensure division, and thus decrease the likelihood of rebellion. This legacy of division and what has manifested into self-hate has persisted, and continues to impact relations between people of African descent in this country. So, much so, that a recent study reported that the marked decline in the availability of young black marriageable men, provides those who are sought after with a certain leverage and opportunity to attain a “high status” spouse, and thus has placed a premium on having lighter skin. ( Hamilton, Goldsmith, Darity, 2008)

As a brown-skin woman, I am very much aware of this, because my skin tone is a source of much ridicule and outward rejection. What is considered urban (read Black) music is filled with musical artists, primarily rappers boasting about their preference for light-skinned women. The critical point of concern is colorism, which is a socialization process that leads to a preference for light skin shade, which happens to be a long standing feature of the Black community in the U.S. (Hamilton, Goldsmith, Darity, 2008). As a womanist I am appalled by this oppressive system and the subjugation of the vast majority of Black women, particularly when considering the entire African Diaspora. Such rejection of the worth and beauty of Black women of darker hues, has helped to fuel the epidemic of skin bleaching. This devaluing and erasure of dark skinned Black women, often spoken out against by controversial womanist, author, and public figure Kola Boof, finally began to draw criticisms and outrage from others, and led to the development of the Bill Duke directed documentary *Dark Girls*, as well as Dr. Yaba Blay's current project *Pretty Period*; all of which proves that dark skin women, do have experiences that differ drastically not only from white women, but also other -- lighter-complexion-- Black women.

### *Natural hair*

Hair, specifically a Black women's natural afro-textured hair, which I choose to wear, often plays a critical role in identity politics. Hair interestingly enough is a factor that greatly impacts a Black women's life and shapes her experiences. Black women and girls who have opted to wear their hair in its natural state have faced many consequences, including having uncertainty about whether their hair may be deemed unacceptable in the working place, school, as well as whether it will be considered a security risk that would be investigated by TSA. (Hollis, 2013; Wilson 2013; Wilson 2012)

Hair, ultimately represents the basic symbol of the things that people want to be, and for this reason its social-cultural significance should not be underestimated (Banks, 2000, 7). In choosing to wear my hair in its natural state, I am confronted with constant inquires from those who hold a position of privilege, that allows them to view their hair as "normal" and even more desirable, and mine as the opposite. My hair takes on deeper socio-cultural meaning and is often viewed as a political statement, and proof of militancy, instead of my mere rejection of the Eurocentric standard of beauty. My hair in this manner, becomes and apparatus that I use for womanist resistance.

### **Conclusive Statements**

The intersecting factors that impact my lived experiences are many, and expand beyond the typical and most often discussed notions of race, gender, and class to include my immigrant background, my cross-cultural upbringing, as well as intra-racial strife. All of these varying factors intersect in a multitude of ways, so much so that they would visibly resemble an intricate spider web, or a net that often feels oppressive and restrictive.

Feminism, or more specifically, womanism, provided me with a means, the appropriate lens, to assess how these intersecting factors impacted my life as a transnational woman of color, and more importantly helped me to find similarity in experiences with other women of color. For instance, for many women of color, the topics of feminism, patriarchy, etc. are not openly discussed within our communities, and feminism itself remains taboo, or as something that is just

for White women. We are forced to acknowledge that middle class, heterosexual, cis White Women, indeed hold a privileged position, and are not burden by the many intersecting socio-cultural factors that we must cope with. They do not have the tremendous task of deciding which portion of their identity, they will make the priority. Whether it be women's issues, immigrant issues, Black Nationalism, LGBT rights, or even the right to wear one's hair in the manner that it springs forth from their scalp, its natural kinky-curly state.

Finally, women of color and Black women are not monoliths. The factors that shape our lived experiences and form our identities do not just form neat easily traceable intersections, instead they collectively develop into a complex spider-web.

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