

Gender, Ethnicity and Place

Women and identities in Guyana

Linda Peake and D. Alissa Trotz

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GENDER, ETHNICITY AND PLACE

The dynamics of gender and ethnicity among women in Guyana form the central concern of this text. In-depth studies of differently racialised women within the same national setting are common to countries of the North, but virtually non-existent in the South. Drawing on primary data collected in three diverse communities, as well as their engagement with Red Thread, a Guyanese Women's Development Programme, Linda Peake and Alissa Trotz analyse how the reproduction of racialised identities relies on gendered practices and representations that are constituted and challenged across a number of sites, entwining the local and the global.

Covering both historical and contemporary periods, the authors examine the heterogeneous and overlapping experiences of groups considered separate, and show how discourses of ethnicity involve silences around inequalities that women may share across racialised divisions. Reflecting on the tensions between the fluidity and obduracy of racialised identities, they explore the conditions under which women may become the site of a critical femininity, raising questions for the nature of activist research, alliances between women and feminist conceptions of development and politics.

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FOR ANDAIYE

CONTENTS

<i>List of maps, figures and tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Acronyms</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Methodology and reflexivity	19
3 The emergence of Guyanese women's identities	40
4 The contemporary situation of Guyanese women	53
5 Gender, ethnicity and the family in Albouystown	76
6 Globalisation and Indo-Guyanese women in Meten Meer Zorg East	102
7 Gender and sexuality among Afro-Guyanese in Linden	127
8 Women across place	153
9 Red Thread's feminism: 'A politics of the possible'?	174
10 Conclusion	198
<i>Bibliography</i>	202
<i>Index</i>	225

MAPS, FIGURES AND TABLES

Maps

1.1	Guyana, 1993	8
5.1	Greater Georgetown and Albouystown	79
6.1	Meten Meer Zorg East	106
7.1	Linden	131

Figures

2.1	Susan's map of Meten Meer Zorg	31
5.1	Women and children in Albouystown	78
6.1	Selling in Meten Meer Zorg	109
7.1	Squatters in Linden	133

Tables

3.1	Women's formal occupations in British Guiana, 1851–1960	46
4.1	Percentage of men and women over 15 years of age in the labour force, 1970–92	61
4.2	Self-employment, 1980–92	64
4.3	Occupational distribution of women, 1992	65
4.4	Occupational distribution of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women, 1992	66
4.5	Headship, marriage, common-law and fertility rates for women, 1980–92	68
4.6	Employment status of women in Albouystown, Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East	72
7.1	Population growth in the Upper Demerara River (UDR), 1891–1991, from natural increase and migration	132
9.1	The aims of Red Thread	184

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Linda Peake and Alissa Trotz
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ACRONYMS

ANDA	Albouystown Neighbourhood Development Association
AWSG	Albouystown Women's Support Group
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CASWIG	Conference on the Affairs and Status of Women
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CXC	Caribbean Examinations Council
ECD	East Coast Demerara
ERA	Equal Rights Amendment Act
ERP	Economic Recovery Programme
GAD	Gender and Development
GFWI	Guyana Federation of Women's Institutes
GUYMINE	Guyana Mining Company
GUYREDEM	Guyana Retrospective Demographic Survey
GUYSUCO	Guyana Sugar Corporation
HIES	Household and Income Expenditure Survey
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LAB	Latin American Bureau
LINMINE	Linden Mining Company
NWC	National Women's Committee
PAC	Political Affairs Committee
PDA	Prevention of Discrimination Act
PNC	People's National Congress
PPP	People's Progressive Party
RT	Red Thread
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SIMAP	Social Impact Amelioration Programme
UF	United Force
WAD	Women and Development
WCD	West Coast Demerara
WICP	Women in the Caribbean Project
WID	Women in Development
WPA	Working People's Alliance

ACRONYMS

WPEO	Women's Political and Economic Organisation
WPO	Women's Progressive Organisation
WRSM	Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement

INTRODUCTION

The Venn Sugar Commission of 1948 estimated that each square mile of cane cultivation involved the provision of forty-nine miles of drainage canals and ditches and sixteen miles of the higher level of waterways used for transportation and irrigation... This meant that slaves moved 100 million tons of heavy, water-logged clay with shovel in hand, while enduring conditions of perpetual mud and water.

(Rodney 1981:2–3)

We open this introductory chapter on Guyana with a quotation from Walter Rodney for two related reasons. First, it is a powerful reminder that Guyana has never been just there, on the northern coast of South America. A colonial invention, its formation as a geographical object in the European imaginary was as a harsh place, with a population and landscape in constant need of beating back, of subduing and taming. But Guyana is not only a product of the imaginary. It is a 'lived space' (Lefebvre 1991), the exploitation of which formed an integral part of European, and especially British, material culture. The point made here, that to study Guyana is to interrogate its creation and its taken-for-granted reality, serves best to describe our approach to the dynamics of gender and ethnicity. It also reminds us that the current globalisation of flows—of labour, capital, values and ideas—against and within which these relations are continually re-invented, has a history we are all too apt to forget. In many ways, this study is an attempt to explore further the humanisation of the Guyanese landscape in the late twentieth century, building on the processes emphasised by Rodney but foregrounding differences and similarities in Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women's lives. We hope to show that not only is difference of major importance in coming to terms with understanding the effects of material processes, but also that the divide between supposedly exclusive groupings is performed in relation to significant others.

Second, Rodney's words underscore the intertwining and mutual construction of place and identity. Just as Rodney makes explicit the connection between the construction of intricate waterways and the immense human sacrifice this entailed, so too are we principally concerned with mapping the often unacknowledged, yet always located, social relations through which Guyanese identities and differences are generated. A most obvious example is that what stands for Guyana—the carving out of a slim habitable strip on the Atlantic littoral—is fundamentally linked to the virtual

obliteration and ongoing marginalisation of the indigenous populations who inhabit the country's interior. Moreover, the massive human effort which Rodney describes so well has also generated in the contemporary period a number of competing originary claims between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese, the descendants of indentured labourers and slaves who constitute the bulk of Guyana's population and the focus of this study. On the coast it is the gendered relations through which the racialised identities of Guyanese women are given meaning and presented as naturalised categories, and the silences they require, which form our main concern.

In this book, then, we explore how contemporary racialised differences between Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women are historically and geographically grounded and reproduced in both material and discursive terrains. But this is not a text about Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women *per se*, rather it is about how Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese gendered identities are produced, sustained and transformed through the intertwining of historically separate scripts and under conditions of immense and rapid social and economic change and dislocation. That is to say, we do not presume an *a priori* existence of Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women, conceiving of gender and ethnicity as fixed and essentialised. Our task, then, would simply be to enumerate and describe differences between groups of women as if they were always already given. Rather we seek to explicate their discursive representations, examining how gendered and racialised identities come to be produced and expressed as natural. We emphasise on the one hand their temporal and spatial fluidity, and on the other their durability and resistance to change. Finally, we explore the ways in which alleged boundaries are continually cross-cut and the degree to which these identities provide a social and political base for democratic practices.

That women form the locus of our empirical investigation should not be taken as an *a priori* acceptance of gender as the primary axis of difference. We start from a point of difference among women but our focus on them is a political imperative, maintained by the recognition that Guyanese female identities are constituted out of experiences of subordination and struggle, leading to a similarity of subject positions. Moreover, the women whose lives we investigate all live in low-income households. That said, we do not intend this study to partake of the tradition of dealing in stereotypical themes that crystallise Third World women into victims of the development process. Rather, it is a recognition of the situatedness of discourses, portraying the reality of the conditions in which the vast majority of the Guyanese population lives. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) has noted, the image of women as homogeneous and victimised was productive of the 'Third World woman' as a stable category in a discursive framework in which 'Western feminism' could be seen as the only site of agency and critical femininity. Thus, moving beyond essentialised images is necessary if we are to capture more adequately the complex and multifaceted relations through which Third World women's

experiences are diversely constructed (Hirshman 1995). It is also critical in revealing the 'universal ethnocentrism' of the core, a necessary first step for increasing contextualised understandings of ethnicity and gender, and if we wish to address seriously the 'persistence of absence' (Slater 1992:324), of structured silences, we need to listen to those most often marginalised.

Furthermore, while we foreground material aspects of women's identities, such as work and household relations, we do not want to reduce women's reality to a single essentialised logic of re/production and labour. Our interest is in exploring how different hegemonic femininities are produced, sustained and transformed by interlocking patterns of work, kinship and sexuality, in the case of a particular group of low-income Third World women, Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese. In this text, then, we show how gendered constructions of racialised identities are constituted and challenged across a number of sites—the household, the labour market, women's organisations, the community and domestic and international migratory circuits. Our starting point, however, is always the embodied subject, and especially its margins or surficial features that demarcate sex, race and ethnicity. As Kirby (1996:13) points out, 'The surfaces of our bodies interact with the divisions between groups drawn up by ideology...' Thus, while all bodies are maps of power and identity (Haraway 1991; Lefebvre 1976), for some groups it is the margins of the body—visual identifiers which both signify and constitute otherness—that may prove most palpable and defining.¹

Our interest in this project arises from a number of factors. We share a number of commonalities, both having experienced academia in North America, England and the Caribbean. In addition, we are both feminists writing about Guyana and members of the Guyana-based Women's Development Programme, Red Thread. So we come to this enterprise with a particular purpose, to use our findings to critically inform terrains of enquiry, of bodies of knowledge and of practice: hence our focus on a study of two marginalised groups of women of colour and an analysis grounded in the feminist praxis of Red Thread. Our hope is to add to a repositioning of the terms on which discourses of gender and ethnicity are created and to do so in a context in which the West is not necessarily the sole interpreter or beneficiary, dismantling the dominant Eurocentric discursive frameworks that have, for over two hundred years, framed the way in which Guyanese women have come to be known. That the full reality of their existence can never be totally known is partially a function of the constraints imposed by a constellation of powers (economic, political, social, cultural) and knowledges (intellectual, moral, scientific) based in Eurocentrism.

Race, ethnicity and gender

In a world in which nation-states can no longer contain the ethnic conflicts that erupt within their boundaries, the analysis of ethnicity has seen a revival in

academic circles. Although supposedly an economic success story as a result of the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) imposed upon it, Guyana remains an underdeveloped country with extremes of economic and political inequality and deep ethnic divisions. Economic and political boundaries in Guyana have been made to correspond closely with ethnic groups, and their differential incorporation into the polity and economy has served to generate conflicting interests as well as to foster notions about the inherent qualities of each other.

Ethnicity and race perhaps remain two of the most contested terms in social and cultural studies. While a variety of meanings have been attached to them, we define race as constructed out of ‘...the separation of human populations by some notion of stock or collective heredity of traits’ (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992:2). While ethnicity, as the positing ‘of an origin as a basis for community or collectivity’ (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992:4) may use race as its principal boundary marker it may also be constituted through other parameters such as religion, sexuality and language. We understand race and ethnicity to be ideological constructs. This is not to deny their material effects but to underscore the ‘*contingency* of biological categories which are chosen according to social and cultural criteria in specific material circumstances’ (Kobayashi and Peake 1994:234). This suggests that race and ethnicity are geographical and historical constructs whose specificity and effects must be named.

Ethnicity is criticised by some theorists for simply and naturally connoting cultural difference and for not engaging with power relations and racism (for a discussion see Gilroy 1987; Stolcke 1993). In this text we retain ethnicity as a term that recognises ‘that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position...’ (Hall 1995:227). However, we reject any notions that ethnicity is natural, immutable or constructed outside of shifting fields of power. Rather, we understand it to incorporate practices of domination/subordination, inclusion/exclusion and contestation/negotiation.

Although Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) point out that race and ethnicity are not the same, in the context of Guyana ethnicity cannot be understood outside of a historical process of racialisation.² Racialised differences and their purported cultural characteristics are products of the colonial encounter (framed by the political and economic needs of the white plantocracy) and continue to be pervasive in contemporary Guyana. Thus race serves as the primary ethnic boundary marker between Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese, the two major groups with which this study is concerned. That is to say, racialised phenotypical differences form the basis upon which descriptive and evaluative claims to cultural distinctiveness are made today.³

The relevance of gender—and sexuality—to racialised identities, particularly when invocations of the latter draw on notions of ‘blood’ and kinship, has not been a central preoccupation in discussions of Guyana or, to a lesser extent, the Caribbean, a point to which we shall return later. We are

also aware that questions of racism and ethnicity continue to remain relatively marginal to debates in the field of gender and development, as well as to much of feminist theorising in general:

Feminist literature also has only recently and then very sporadically become even conscious that it has ignored the ways in which gender and class processes differentially affect women from different ethnic and racialized social groups and has generally assumed a unitary category of women. Where the concept of ethnicity has been given consideration within feminist writing (for example, Barrett and McIntosh 1985) it merely points to the cultural or ethnic difference between groups rather than rethinking the project of feminism.... [M]ost...work has not been able to integrate into its analysis differentiation structured either by racism or by ethnicity.

(Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992:97)⁴

As Anthias and Yuval-Davis aptly note, construing the relationship between gender and race/ethnicity in terms of cultural diversity bypasses the need to consider the contexts which give rise to such differences. Moving beyond this position entails a consideration of 'relational connectedness' (Ware 1992:119). While not a term that slips off the tongue as easily as 'difference', it highlights two important points: that difference is not internally generated but socially constructed, and that it arises not out of isolation, of dominant groups in the centre and subordinates on the margins, but out of linkages, ones which imply what Patricia Hill Collins (1995:225) identifies as varying degrees of penalty and privilege. We problematise gender and racialised ethnicity as sites of difference, because difference is not simply about different people with disconnected ways of doing things but rather about unequal access to power, about the relations through which differences are produced and reified across multiple spaces.

Ethnicity—as a claim to cultural difference—is often evoked as social identity through kinship metaphors and is 'organized around rules relating to sexuality, marriage and the family' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992:113). This emphasis on family, on intimacy and on the sharing of 'blood' (Williams 1995), has specific repercussions for women, not least in terms of their sexualities. Boundaries of ethnic groups, although based on a wide variety of criteria, include conforming to (never static) cultural practices, central to which are the sexual practices of women. For not only are women biologically responsible for reproducing the group, but they are also often charged with the duty of transmitting culture within the domestic domain and symbolising group identity and respectability in the wider arena.

That this enterprise is never simply self-referential, but always conducted through oppositions which have arisen out of specific historical conjunctures, further highlights the fact that the apparent internal stability of the domestic domain is actually based on wider flows and relations that always exceed its

limits. None the less, discourses around ethnicity all too frequently involve and depend on denying such flows, creating silences around the inequalities that women may share across such divisions. Thus the household, as a cultural idiom, provides one way of talking about and instantiating racialised divisions between women. At the same time, while racialised identities are inextricably related to imposed definitions, women do not simply bow to a predetermined fate but sometimes, and obviously within limits, may fashion their identities for their own purposes and to their own ends (Kandiyoti 1991; McClintock 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997). It is these tensions between what is attributed, what is embraced and what is ultimately changed, which this book seeks to explore.

Place and identity

In examining these issues, exactly which places are we concerned with, and how do we choose to represent them? Our aim is to produce an analysis concerned with 'real' people and 'real' spaces and on practices taking place between them. This terminology should not be seen as an attempt on our part to naturalise absolute space; what is 'real' is, to be sure, itself a construct, and places only exist through their representation (Smith and Katz 1993). In other words, by 'real' we underline our interest in specific places and the experiences of particular subjects in these places. We are concerned with what Lefebvre (1991) called 'lived space', which encompasses both the 'perceived space' of material spatial practices and the 'conceived space' of symbolic representations and epistemology (see Soja 1996). Some of the (representations of) spaces we are concerned with are the traditional ones well recognised by geographers, economists, anthropologists and political scientists as their 'turf', for example, the world region of the Caribbean, the nation-state of Guyana, urban and rural settlements, labour markets, and households. But other spaces (of representation) are more familiar to cultural studies and feminist audiences, such as the bodily spaces of racialised subjects and subjectivities.⁵ In the discussion of Guyana and its location in a broader Caribbean context, which follows below, we merge issues relating to both.⁶

In the context of Guyana where discursive practices based on previous regimes of power are deeply inscribed in the coastal landscapes and institutions (see Barnes and Duncan 1992), identification with place is one of the primary sources of cultural identity. We aim to counterpose attempts to interpret places as natural or inherent spaces defined in relation to others who are excluded. Following Massey (1992:12), we argue that place can be conceptualised in a more radical manner, as 'formed out of the particular set of social relations that interact at a particular location'. This means that place identities are never fixed but fluid and provisional, open to contestation. Furthermore, places are constituted through dynamic and specific relations with other sites: 'It is precisely in part the presence of the outside within which helps to construct the specificity of the local place' (Massey 1992:13). Space

then is not just the backdrop against which social interaction takes place; space constitutes difference and is deeply implicated in the production of identities and inequalities.

Guyanese spaces

Guyana is located on the north-eastern shoulder of South America, with a land area of 214,970 kilometres, approximately the same size as Britain, and large in relation to its Caribbean neighbours. Yet to some Caribbeanists and the majority of Latin Americanists it remains relatively unexplored, peripheral even in the periphery. In some respects, Guyana's marginalisation may be seen as a product of its history and geography. On the one hand, it remains the only English-speaking country in South America (although some border and Amerindian communities share languages with other groups in South America) and claims greater affinity with the Commonwealth Caribbean than with Latin America. On the other hand, its location in South America sets it apart from the Caribbean islands. Moreover, the economic difficulties and political problems which have plagued Guyana for most of its post-Independence life (since 1966) render it somewhat anachronistic in a region which until recently prided itself on its relative political and economic stability.

Guyana is divided into a narrow coastal strip between 15 and 65 kilometres wide, a forest zone south of the coast, and a savannah, the Rupununi, in the south-west. Three main rivers, the Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice, flow into the Atlantic Ocean to the north; the remaining borders are shared with Venezuela, Brazil and Surinam (see Map 1.1). With some 730,000 inhabitants (in 1991), Guyana has one of the lowest population densities in the world, though well over 90 per cent make their homes on the coast. The origin of most of Guyana's traditional exports (sugar, rice, bauxite) reflects this concentration, although the country's interior is now one of its fastest growing sites of foreign investment.

The cognitive maps of coastal residents rarely exceed the limits of this strip and the interior is imaginatively constructed as distant and unknown. It is selectively embraced to highlight Guyana's distinctiveness—particularly its size—in relation to the Caribbean islands. For some Guyanese living abroad it also legitimates self-descriptions as South American, which has less to do with acknowledging a linkage with the land mass this denotes than an effort to escape the memory of their departure from or identification with a country more recently made notorious on the global stage by the Jonestown tragedy of 1978.⁷ The interior and its predominantly Amerindian residents are also less charitably and far more commonly dismissed as 'bush' and 'buck' respectively, with all the connotations of backwardness and primitiveness this implies (Roopnaraine 1996). Ironically it is this perceived distance from modernity which has recently rendered the area a magnet for new investment, whether through the showcasing of 'pristine' Amerindian communities and unspoiled



Map 1.1 Guyana, 1993

ways of life for eco-tourist consumption, the depredation of vast sections of rainforest, or the industrial-scale mining of gold and diamonds.

In his book, *Georgetown Journal*, Andrew Salkey recounts a conversation with the renowned Guyanese novelist, Wilson Harris, in which Harris claims, 'It's difficult to do anything with some places. You name them, and they disappear.' (Wilson Harris quoted in Salkey 1972:82.) Guyana, in many ways, does seem to be in danger of disappearing from the world map, and not only because so many people find it difficult to place. The coastal area lies below sea level, guarded only by a sea wall in constant need of repair. Surinam and Venezuela have made claims to over two-thirds of its territory. Although its time as a place for the extraction of raw materials for British capital is over, new interests have led to the interior being carved up and (cheaply) doled out to international consortiums engaged in logging, mining and environmental preservation for the global community (Colchester 1997). Even the international financial institutions, which are so keen to depict Guyana as a success story among the many failures of structural adjustment, find it difficult to refrain from despairing at the extent of deterioration of the country.⁸ Its population is constantly being depleted, attracted by the family ties and 'bright lights' of North America. Its harnessing to North American cities—New York,

Toronto, Miami—for employment, financial flows and consumption, the increasing presence of transnational corporations (TNCs) in the economy, mass immigration and the emergence of the ‘transnational family’ are reconfiguring the terms on which a Guyanese identity is understood (both at home and abroad). Guyana is no longer contained by the boundaries that demarcate its geographical place; to be Guyanese is a term that is increasingly broached in terms of movement, and one is always talking of coming or going (even if one is stationary). The boundaries that for so long contained the Guyanese people no longer operate as fixed entities. Indeed, for overseas Guyanese, they act more as markers of distance.

Wilson Harris, however, was not referring to literal acts of disappearance but rather to the fixing of a place’s identity that prevents us from thinking of Guyana outside of the hegemonic discourses which pervade its national space. People who are quasi-familiar with it commonly depict Guyana as a scary place. Stories abound of a land with no electricity or running water where people barely survive on handouts from relatives and international aid organisations, and of dense bush teeming with malaria, snakes and *jumbies* (spirits). It is portrayed as a backward, primitive space in which wayward sects and communes flourish in the atmosphere of corruption and misinformation that characterise public life. Elements of truth form the basis of these scenarios, but the myth-like proportions they have taken on result more from the economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s than from any empirical facts.

Perhaps the most pervasive image of all, one which stands as a metonym for Guyana, and which therefore concerns us most, is that of a population irretrievably divided along ethnic lines (see Premdas 1995), a ‘natural disaster’ of sorts. Guyana has been characterised in much of the anthropological and sociological literature as a ‘plural society’. This diversity is the consequence of European expansionism, which resulted first in the decimation of the indigenous Amerindian populations. Large-scale production of sugar saw the development of the coastal plantation as the dominant form of economic organisation in a region whose primary purpose was the extraction and transfer of wealth to Europe. The physical geography of the coastal area, in which we conducted most of our data collection, is a result of the labouring activities of generations of slaves and indentured labourers. While the imperialist imperative of ‘producing space’ was frequently contested—revolts by slaves and indentured labourers were common (Ramnarine 1987; Viotti da Costa 1994)—the coastal environment continued to provide the context within which production and reproduction took place. Sugar relied on slave labour from Africa from the seventeenth century onwards and, in the post-abolition years, on indentured labour from Portugal, China and India. Ethnicity rose to prominence out of this colonial encounter, the naming of groups serving to refer to geographical origin, to make assumptions linking culture and phenotype, to determine access to the means of production and to demarcate positionality in a stratified, colour-coded social class system.

It is this very plurality, and the attribution to it of an ontological credibility, which has come to dominate Guyana's recent history. Nationalist struggles, while explicitly engaged in repudiating the racialised inferiorisation of identity that characterised colonial rule, none the less remained captive to a particular way of representing difference. Guyana is described today as a 'land of six peoples': Amerindian, African, Chinese, East Indian, European and Portuguese.⁹ Rather than interrogate the production of these categorical identities, this naming accepts their existence as inherent, ahistorical, even necessary elements of social life, and seeks instead to harness their allegiance to a single cause. Hence Guyana's post-independence national motto: *One people, One nation. One destiny.*

This, then, is not a country where all melds into one. Nor are these labels innocuous or equally valued. Their relevance today emanates primarily from a political arena riven along racialised lines from the 1950s onwards, dominated for twenty-eight years by the People's National Congress (PNC), a government supported by Afro-Guyanese and kept in power through electoral fraud (LAB 1984). The victory of the Indo-Guyanese-supported People's Progressive Party (PPP), following the eventual return to electoral democracy in 1992 (and again in 1997), affirmed that the principle of racialised identification, far from being transcended, was simply restated more forcefully. By now it should be clear that the numbers game is paramount: according to 1991 figures, Indians accounted for 48 per cent of the population, Africans 33 per cent, Mixed 12 per cent and Amerindians 6 per cent, with the remaining 1 per cent comprising Chinese, European and Portuguese. While distinction is presented as natural, it is the differences—attributed and claimed—between descendants of slaves and indentured labourers which have come to monopolise the national discourse of the coast. Discourses between these racialised ethnic groups in Guyana focus on litanies of the cultural inferiority of 'others', of the disastrous results of the political rule of 'others', of the inability of 'others' to contribute to the economic growth of the country, and of themselves as 'givers' and the 'others' as 'takers' (Williams 1989).

Thus whereas Vivian Richards's description of the West Indies cricket team as African during his tenure as captain might be capable of absorption into the cultural context of nationalist discourse in most of the Caribbean, it was unacceptable for large sections of the Guyanese population, who saw it as yet another instance of black hegemony and dominance (also see Yelvington 1995b on Trinidad). Nor is 'mixture', which in Latin America serves up an image of miscegenation as a metaphor for national unity (albeit remaining essentially predicated on hierarchy, namely the denigration of blackness and Indianness), similarly deployed in Guyana (see Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Wade 1993). Miscegenation has always existed in Guyana, and there are names for its numerous variations, *dougl*a being the most frequent, and used to refer to a mixture of Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese. More optimistic versions may see the *dougl*a as potential of a more tolerant and hybrid Guyanese

future, but the *dougla* is also located in discourses of impurity and contamination. In the national arena it is significant that 'different and equal' has always taken precedence over the 'douglarisation' of culture in the projection of a Guyanese identity. It is precisely this tension between racialised difference and national loyalty which has produced competing claims to entitlements and efforts to enumerate, stage and authenticate ethnic contributions as equally worthy of creating 'Guyanese-ness' (Williams 1991).

In this context, racialised ethnic references intrude into everyday conversations and are a structuring principle of coastal life.¹⁰ This is not to say that social relations are completely pervaded by inter-ethnic rivalry and hostility or that no other forms of affiliation exist which cross-cut such divisions; such a conclusion overlooks the range of ways in which ethnic terms are deployed and have become in some ways an accepted and mundane part of the local social fabric (Drummond 1980). Certainly if we consider recent human tragedies, Guyana presents one of the more stable 'plural societies' of recent times. Yet it is also the case that whether used affectionately, dispassionately as description, or as a mark of explicit abuse, such terms reference a symbolic landscape into which persons are placed, replete with phenotypical and cultural attributes as well as predictions and expectations of everyday behaviour. Moreover, the destructive potential of racialised identification remains a most resilient and powerful mobilising force.¹¹

If our focus on Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women appears, at first glance, to reproduce a particularly pervasive representation of Guyana and its people, we hope to raise questions and issues that undermine any easy or straightforward acceptance of the dominant picture. Rather than take racialised ethnic identities as self-evident and internally coherent, we attempt to show both how ideas and social practices have produced a hegemonic discourse around ethnicity, as well as to demonstrate how this more often than not deflects attention away, not just from the place-specific and everyday constructions of identity but also from the similarities faced by women in their daily experiences. For the harsh reality of everyday life in Guyana is that in a context in which the politics of racialisation have dictated developments in all areas of social and economic life, scarce resources are consumed by this no-win situation and the vast majority of the country's population have been the losers.

Caribbean spaces

The Caribbean provides the broader regional context in which we locate our discussion of gender and ethnicity in Guyana. It is also the site of a series of ongoing conversations with which we want to engage, not just because they remain relatively unknown outside 'area specialist' circles, but because they address issues far broader than their apparent geographical referent (a referent which is anyway difficult to identify in the current era of migration, so that the

Caribbean is just as likely to exist in New York or Toronto). In a sense there is no surprise in this, for the story of the modern Caribbean begins with global shifts of people, with rupture, transplantation and displacement.

Our interest here is in briefly delineating two spaces of representation within academic work produced on (and, we believe, partly productive of) the Caribbean.¹² The first pertains to the relative marginalisation of women and questions of gender from the research agenda, as well as the terms under which they have been included. Early anthropological and sociological work on the Caribbean tended largely to be studies of kinship. Notwithstanding differences over interpretations of trends, there was general agreement on what a household was and how it should function, which derived from an unquestioned set of assumptions about the universality of the Euro-American nuclear family underpinned by the male breadwinner and the dependent female housewife. Framed in this way, and confronted with a variety of domestic and sexual arrangements which did not conform to academic expectations, research was preoccupied with accounting for these 'deviations' rather than with analysing them on their own terms (for an overview see Barrow 1988, 1996). Moreover, dominant precepts of female domesticity meant that Caribbean women were scarcely represented outside of kinship and household studies.

Notions of female domesticity were difficult to sustain once attention shifted from the places in which women were expected to be found to other places that they actually occupied and the ways in which these became constitutive of gender. This shift occurred via a growing body of feminist research in the region during the 1970s. A multidisciplinary study, the Women in the Caribbean Project (WICP), carried out surveys among thousands of women across the region between 1979 and 1982. The WICP produced a rich body of material attesting to the multiple and overlapping roles undertaken by women in the workforce, the household, kin networks and religious and political movements, although at the time it was more concerned with rendering women's lives visible than with providing an explanatory framework for gendered relations.¹³

Research over the past decade has increasingly addressed the latter issue, much of it focused on articulations between various local and global spaces and flows (Andaiye 1995; Antrobus 1989; Barrow 1988, López Springfield 1997): industrialisation and the insertion of the Caribbean in the global economy (Abraham-Van der Mark 1993; Freeman 1993; Pearson 1993; Safa 1995); women, politics and the state (Alexander 1991; Bolles 1996; Peake 1993; Reddock 1994); and women and structural adjustment policies (Bolles 1981; Deere *et al.* 1990; French 1994; McAfee 1991; Momsen 1993b; Safa 1992; Senior 1991; Trotz 1998).¹⁴

It is equally within this literature that we situate our own work. Yet discussions of ethnicity—the second space of representation—within this recent body of feminist research have been less than satisfactory. There have been relatively few attempts in the Caribbean literature to extensively discuss relations between racialised groups of women as opposed to treating constructions of gender within a specifically denoted group (but see McClaurin

1996; Reddock 1994; Yelvington 1995a). Additionally, most accounts are based exclusively on the lives of low-income Afro-Caribbean women.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, this has led to stereotyping and misplaced extrapolations in the broader feminist literature on development, such as the views that female-headed households are a *sine qua non* in the Caribbean, or that Caribbean women have a far more continuous relationship to the labour market than women in other geographical areas. Kabeer (1994), for instance, claims that patriarchal households contrast with the weaker cohesiveness of the conjugal unit in the Caribbean, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Scott (1994) similarly notes that the nuclear family in the Caribbean is much weaker, structurally and ideologically, than its Latin American counterpart. And while Brydon and Chant (1989:23) do recognise ethnic diversity within the Caribbean, they reiterate the view that Indo-Caribbean women 'occupy a less independent role than their black counterparts'.

There have been numerous debates around the question of whether Caribbean societies are internally plural, dividing into non-overlapping segments each with its own (sub) culture, or whether the emphasis should be placed on processes of creolisation i.e. on colour-class differentiation, in a system integrated around a set of shared norms.¹⁶ In relation to gender, kinship and household analyses we can identify two issues: whether Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean populations constituted discrete groups with separate household and kinship practices; and whether the lives of working-class Afro-Caribbeans set them apart from the ways in which kinship and households were defined among middle- and upper-income groups.¹⁷ Recent writings (Douglass 1992; Lazarus-Black 1994; Miller 1994; Reddock 1994; R.T.Smith 1988, 1996; Williams 1991; Yelvington 1995a) have focused less on answering these questions as if ethnic or class identities were always already made, and have focused attention instead on the mutual ways in which class, sexuality, ethnicity and gender instantiate divisions and restrict privilege to certain groups, thus replacing a concern with cultural traditionalism with one of the politics of cultural difference (Taylor 1993). Emphasis is now on linkages rather than separation and on including power and conflict into alternative portraits of consensus and integration.

The temptation to treat Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean populations as bounded groups presupposes that these subjectivities are stable and homogeneous. Yet the representation of stability disguises a shifting terrain in which other axes of difference make it useless to speak of a singular Afro-Guyanese or Indo-Guyanese identity, even if we think we know what is claimed in their name. This shifts the focus from a mere catalogue of ethnic markers to an explication of how such identities are generated and framed in terms of distinctive contrast, drawing heavily on metaphors of the family and kinship to naturalise membership of and obligations to racialised collectivities. It also entails an analysis of the modes of gendered and sexualised subordination and silence that the construction of such identities entails.

Book outline

What follows are two chapters that contextualise this study. Chapter Two addresses the research context explaining our collaboration and concern with issues of authorial and political representation. We also outline the methodologies employed, including our own separate accounts of the problematic nature of the ‘insider-outsider’ divide, further illustrating the difficulties of transcending intransigent racialised perceptions. Chapter Three attempts to decentre colonial readings of Guyanese women’s identities. Located in the historical, we foreground the legacy of modernity, destabilising the certainties of colonialised constructions of gendered subjectivity, while also acknowledging their enduring traces. Historical research is not only necessary to grasp the processes of the construction of identities and uncover the agency of colonial subjects, but also counteracts the erasure of women from Guyanese history and helps to explain their contemporary silencing.

Against the backdrop of Guyana’s transition to Independence, Chapter Four analyses the gendered implications of the various development strategies pursued over the last thirty years. It sets out the main parameters of the current situation of women in Guyana in relation to legislation, employment and fertility patterns. The chapter concludes with a justification of the three places in which fieldwork was conducted, focusing on a brief description of the characteristics of the sample households in these locations.

In the second section, Chapters Five to Seven serve to differentiate within the periphery. Focusing on the three heterogeneous sites in which fieldwork was conducted, our intention is not to usher in a comparative approach to a situation of declining economic resources but to highlight the formation of specific identities in relation to both significant others and silences, and within the context of places ‘knotted’ together within the dialectic of local—global (Gregory 1994). The themes we emphasise highlight various facets of identity formation among Guyanese women: women’s relations with other women; women’s integration into global flows; and the sexualised relations between women and men. Brief descriptions of the three places appear in each chapter drawing upon what Harvey (1996:293) refers to as ‘grounded feeling’ of what place constitutes.

What are the dominant representations of ethnicity and gender we found in these places, and how do women negotiate them in their practices of cultural reproduction? Chapter Five looks at Albouystown, a low-income urban neighbourhood in the capital city of Georgetown, in which Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese residents share a sense of belonging *vis-à-vis* outsider representations of the area, but also claim to be different from (and sometimes better than) each other. We explore how Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women’s identities and conceptions of themselves and each other draw on and are produced by discourses and practices around paid work, domesticity, sexuality, kinship flows and perceptions of difference. Chapter Six introduces

the rural Indo-Guyanese, East Coast Demerara village of Meten Meer Zorg East. A discursive space in which racialised and gendered differences are heavily inscribed, the village is carved out in the spatial imaginaries of its residents as a space of 'Indianness'. Through an examination of the specificity of their positioning within a range of global flows the chapter explores how Indo-Guyanese women form their identities within the tension between the villagers' role as a reserve of cheap labour for the sugar estates and the contemporary globalisation of the villagers' social imaginaries. In Chapter Seven the focus turns to the interior mining town of Linden. A colonial creation, it still exhibits a system of residential apartheid redolent of an earlier era of flows and for the vast majority of its existence the town has been dependent upon the industry of bauxite mining. Emphasis is given to silences in the dominant discursive representations of Linden as an Afro-Guyanese working-class town. Specifically, the privileging of social relations of heterosexuality has been essential for the construction of Afro-Guyanese women's and men's identities as family members, identities which serve as the linchpin of a spatially sequestered and economically depressed community.

If the previous section shows how difference and identity are produced, contested and negotiated in particular places, then the final section focuses on how difference and identities can also produce potential common ground. Chapter Eight considers gendered access to resources in all three places. Although meanings could and did vary from place to place, lack of material and symbolic resources characterised the lives of all women. Our focus here is on a number of issues that repeatedly came up in our interviews: the allocation of income and decision-making; housework; social networks; and domestic violence.

Chapter Nine discusses new forms of subject positioning among women, examining the potential for organising around racialised differences. In a world increasingly structured by transnational realities and deepening inequalities, new sites of emancipatory practices deserve our attention. It is in this chapter that we attempt to assess the feminist practices of Red Thread. Defining itself as a Women's Development Programme, it is involved in the praxis of mapping out configurations that allow differentially racialised women to work together. As well as reflecting on our own closures in this study the brief concluding chapter stresses both the fluidity and obduracy of racialised identities, as well as the possibilities they raise for democratic practices.

Notes

- 1 They may also produce a sense of awareness of the whole, the view of the 'outsider within' (Hill Collins 1995). As bell hooks points out, the margin may also be a 'location of radical openness and possibility' (hooks 1990:22).
- 2 Miles (1989:75) refers to the concept of racialisation as: 'those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities'.

- 3 While we stress our use of ethnicity as a geographical and historical construct we accept that the term 'racialised ethnicity' could be construed as problematic, implying that there is some prior ethnicity that is only subsequently racialised. We prefer it however to the use of alternatives such as racio-ethnic (see, for example, Nakano Glenn 1992) which we think does not as effectively convey a notion of social constructedness. We thank Peter Jackson for raising this point with us.
- 4 Since the 1980s there have been a small, but influential, number of attempts by feminists to address the interrelations between ethnicity, race, gender and class. See Amos and Parmar 1984; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Carby 1982; Charles and Hintjens 1998; Davis 1981, 1984; hooks 1981, 1984; Phizacklea 1983; Spelman 1988; Westwood 1984; Westwood and Bhachu 1988. In Australia, Canada and the USA edited volumes that explore these interrelations in specific national contexts are emerging (see Bottomley and De Lepervanche 1984; Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995).
- 5 Although the conceptual spaces through which we address these concerns are primarily via an explicit engagement with feminist and Caribbean-based literature and debates, a note is appropriate here on the extent to which this study engages with post-colonialism. It is, to be sure, a major consideration that is interwoven into our substantive concerns in a variety of ways, including: as a historical marker, to signify changes in power structures from colonial structures; as a political term to indicate the continuing—unequal—effects of colonialism and their discursive representation; as a conceptual category to incorporate concerns of contemporary socio-geographical flows that can no longer be contained by modern categorisations of the world; and as a space (of representation) that goes beyond colonial and nationalist narratives. We are also concerned with what we consider the most virulent critiques of this genre; namely, that along with other brands of contemporary critical theory it exercises a hegemony that silences the voices of women of colour; that it is a form of intellectual production based primarily in the Western academy; and that its relation to global capitalism is not well understood (see, for example, Alexander and Mohanty 1997b; Appadurai 1996; Bhabha 1991; Dirlík 1997; Hall 1996; McClintock 1994; Mongia 1996; Shohat 1992).
- 6 Or what Smith and Katz (1993:68) refer to as material and metaphorical spaces:
- The breadth of interest in space is matched by the breadth of spatial concepts in vogue...But, perhaps surprisingly, there has been little, if any, attempt to examine the different implications of material and metaphorical space. Metaphorical concepts and uses of 'space' have evolved quite independently from materialist treatments of space, and many of the latter are cast in ways that suggest equal ignorance of the productive entailments of spatial metaphors.
- 7 In 1978 the Reverend Jim Jones rendered Guyana infamous when he forced the mass suicide of over 900 members of his People's Temple. They had settled in the country in 1974 following their increasing persecution in the United States.
- 8 Witness the following comment in a recent World Bank report, 'Notwithstanding the rapid economic recovery, poverty prevails. The government's capacity to deliver essential services has virtually collapsed. Infrastructure remains severely dilapidated. The supply of potable water is limited to a small proportion of the population, drainage and irrigation systems have deteriorated to the point that they are no longer useful, and health and education services have become so inadequate that social indicators for the country have fallen to among the lowest in the Caribbean' (World Bank 1994:ii).
- 9 Owing to the context of their arrival in the Caribbean—as indentured labourers—and despite the fact that they were able to establish themselves in Guyana as a petty

- bourgeoisie, the naming of Portuguese as a racialised group distinct from Europeans was critical to maintain the distance between their subordinate position and the British who owned the means of production or could claim a legacy of ownership and control.
- 10 As Roopnaraine (1996) has shown, in interior mining camps such distinctions between Afro- and Indo-Guyanese virtually lose their meaning, the result of these communities being largely ignored by—and thus insulated from—the state. In contrast, many migrants overseas cleave to ethnic differences, although one also finds cross-cutting assertions of a common Guyanese identity in the so-called diaspora. In the absence of research, it would seem that this is partly produced by the fact that communities abroad (and more importantly, the Western countries to which they have moved) are actively courted by the Guyanese government, politicians and arms of political parties, and finally their perception that they can and do continue to make an impact on domestic politics.
 - 11 This has been vividly underlined by the race riots of the early 1960s, national voting patterns and the disturbances in Guyana's capital city following the outcome of the most recent 1997 elections.
 - 12 In relation to the latter we should add that the vast majority of this work focuses on the Commonwealth Caribbean, in the process setting it apart from its Hispanophone, Francophone and Lusophone neighbours in ways which cannot be easily explained away.
 - 13 The findings of the WICP were published in *Social and Economic Studies* 2 & 3 1986, as well as a monograph series, and continue to be used in the work of others (Mallett 1993; Senior 1991). The precursor to the WICP was a body of interdisciplinary research that had begun to emerge around the mid-1970s (Henry and Wilson 1975; Mathurin 1975; Moses 1981; Roberts and Sinclair 1978; Smith 1978).
 - 14 Other areas of recent research include Caribbean feminist epistemologies (Barriteau 1992; Greene 1993; Mohammed 1994b); alternative methodologies (Antrobus 1989; Ford-Smith 1997a; Haniff 1988); women and agriculture (Harry 1993; Momsen 1993a; Odie-Ali 1986; Stubbs 1993); women and health (Allen 1997; Sobo 1993); sexuality (Alexander 1991; Wekker 1997); migration and transnationalised families (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Wiltshire 1992); women and the informal sector (Holder 1988; Lloyd-Evans 1995); women and prostitution (Kempadoo 1996; Trotz and Peake 1998); women and religion (Austin 1984; Mohammed 1993; Yawney 1989); women and housing (Peake 1987); women and literature (Cooper 1993; Espinet 1990; O'Callaghan 1993); and masculinities (Lewis 1996; Dampath 1993). There is also a large body of literary texts which cross over and between these spaces. For Guyana see the work of Joan Cambridge (1988); Mahadai Das (1988); Norma de Haart (1991); Beryl Gilroy (1986); Pauline Melville (1990,1997); Grace Nichols (1986); Lakshmi Persaud (1993) and Jan Lo Shinebourne (1986, 1988). Even here the boundaries are not clear-cut, and some novelists and poets have academic publications (Brodbber 1986; Ford-Smith 1997; Senior 1991). The richness of these accounts is exemplified by the crossing of membership in various organisations concerned with women's development: Women and Development Studies Group at UWI; Women Studies Department at University of Guyana; Sistren Theatre Collective: CAFRA; Red Thread; and WAND, part of the Extra-Mural Centre at UWI in Barbados.
 - 15 Although efforts to close this gap have begun. In relation to Indo-Caribbean women, see, for example, Espinet 1993; Haniff 1988; Mohammed 1994; Mohapatra 1995; Reddock 1985b, 1994.

- 16 It is beyond the scope of this text to rehearse the debates here. See M.G.Smith 1965; R.T.Smith 1956, 1967, 1988.
- 17 See for example Clarke 1957; Henriques 1953; Jayawardena, 1962; Klass 1968; Nevadomsky 1982; Rodman 1971; M.G.Smith 1956.

METHODOLOGY AND REFLEXIVITY

Introduction

Adding to our understanding of the construction of gender and racialised ethnicity among low-income women in the South, and doing so from a perspective that does not privilege Western ways of knowing, requires addressing the parameters that frame our engagement with this study. Hence, before reporting on the research we discuss the methodological and reflexive issues with which we had to contend. Encounters between women across racialised divides, the politics of representation and the fragmentary, even contradictory, nature of research methods and identities delimit the contours of the material and metaphorical territory we wish to cover in this chapter. We start by locating ourselves in the complex and shifting matrix of power relations in this project. Our specific modes of ‘covering territory’ in the practice of feminist research are addressed both through a discussion of the methods we employed and exercises in border-crossing which serve to highlight the fine line between the subversive strategies of feminism and its inscription in ‘...Western logocentrism, patriarchal rationality and imperialist practices’ (Lather 1996:360).

Placing ourselves in the field

Systems of political hierarchy based on differences of gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation are not parallel to each other... but interlocked and mutually creating and maintaining. A setback or advance in one reverberates through the whole network of hierarchy creating consequences far away from where such change began. This point clarifies why, for example, feminism can and must try to centre analyses from the perspective of marginalised women’s lives.
(Harding 1992:180)

We open this section with a quotation from Sandra Harding because it addresses one issue and raises the other, that frame the nature of our engagement in the research process (including the production of this text). The

first is that we, as feminists, have a responsibility to engage in liberatory projects.¹ The nature of our insertion into such projects is not arbitrary, however, but dependent on our locations which arise from our own geographical and historical trajectories as well as our social and geographical imaginaries. To disclaim the right to speak about low-income Guyanese women denies our common insertions into shared discourses of race, ethnicity, gender and the 'new world order' (see Radcliffe 1994), i.e. as academics we can make use of the authority inherent in our positions to challenge global relations of patriarchies, racisms and colonialisms (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Haraway 1991; hooks 1990).² The second issue that such engagement raises is that of representation: how do we authorially represent women in our productions and how do we resolve how to represent them without politically appropriating them? (Radcliffe 1994.)

In the sections that follow we address the first of these issues, i.e. the manner of our engagement in this project, through a discussion of the research methods we employed, highlighting how our perspectives on how we engage in progressive research practices are grounded in our positionalities. We then examine the issue of authorial representation through the naming strategies in which we engaged, while the thorny issue of political representation is taken up in an exploration of border-crossing, mapping and insider-outsider perspectives. The question of political representation has become immersed in spatial metaphors of mobility that we find problematic when applied to the lives of the majority of the women discussed in this research. What is striking is their lack of mobility and their spatial circumscription. We prefer (along with Gerry Pratt 1992) not to engage with metaphors of mobility with all the senses of material power and/or coercion that they imply. Indeed, it was the apparent durability, stability and centrality of racialised ethnic identities preventing unity among Guyanese women that first attracted our attention. Instead, we find more useful the spatial metaphor of the borderland as a place. It serves to emphasise the locatedness of both people and knowledge, while simultaneously emphasising that it is '...a socially constructed place in which difference and conflict is constructed and lived' (Pratt 1992:243).

Methods

Our motivations in participating in this research should be viewed in light of our engagement with Guyana: thus, we expand here upon the factors that have contributed to the positionality of this text. It comes from a school of thought that we wish to identify as anti-racist, feminist praxis; its genre is that of a scholarly piece with, we hope, a degree of accessibility to a broad audience; our authorial voices are those of First and Third World academics and activists, one a geographer, the other eschewing a disciplinary label. Our analyses draw upon numerous conversations over the years with each other and Guyanese friends and colleagues which have elaborated upon our understanding of the

complex social systems and cultural practices with which Guyanese women engage. Moreover, the writing process was one in which we had constant interactions with each other and Red Thread in an effort to ground our text in the lives of the women who participated in its production. Indeed, it was our mutual, although until the conducting of this research, separate, engagements with Red Thread that allowed this text to be produced. Alissa's involvement with Red Thread arose from being raised among the small circles of radical political activists in Georgetown. Linda's arose from first going to the country over twenty years ago to visit friends and subsequently to teach at the University of Guyana. Her membership of the British Labour Party led to her establishing contact with the Working People's Alliance and its female members who went on to form Red Thread.

While both of us employed methodologies we consider to be feminist in intent, our techniques for gathering data differed. This was partially due to what we considered to be the best ways of acquiring the information we wanted, given constraints of time and money, specifically the ability to pay research assistants, as well as differences between ourselves in terms of our own racialised and national identities and our subsequent (never fixed) positions on the sliding scale of insider-outsider. While Alissa could draw upon her gendered and racialised identity as a black/mixed woman to build up a relation of trust with the women she interviewed, it was Linda's whiteness which created a border that, while not impermeable, could not be approached directly.³ Linda's association with Red Thread provided one way of crossing that border and of establishing trust. Our positionalities thus prescribed different techniques, but both methodologies were open to addressing women's lives in terms of their own experiences. In both cases the relationship between the researcher and the researched was mediated either by Red Thread or the Albouystown Women's Support Group (AWSG); in both cases relations continue. The defining elements of these two methods are outlined below.

Alissa

Planning

In Cambridge, England in early 1990 I drew up plans for my Ph.D. project in Guyana. In November 1992 I started fieldwork in Albouystown, a low-income area in the capital city, Georgetown.

Survey design and implementation

Initial contact with Albouystown was made through the area's Health Centre, a mosque in an adjoining village, and

Linda

Planning

In Toronto, Canada in late 1991 I submitted a grant application to SSHRC for a research project in Guyana. In January 1993 I went to Guyana to commence the fieldwork with Red Thread.

Survey design and implementation

Two settlements—one Indo-Guyanese, Meten Meer Zorg East, and the other predominantly Afro-

one woman who lived in the area and worked at the University of Guyana where I had a temporary research attachment. In addition, officials at the Central Housing and Planning Authority and the Women's Affairs Bureau (Ministry of Labour) introduced me to members of two community groups, the Albouystown Neighbourhood Development Association (ANDA) and the AWSG. Both AND A and the AWSG allowed me to attend their meetings and gave me unlimited access to their office space, thus providing me with a physical base in the community. My interests were extensively discussed with members of AWSG who gave invaluable input into the development of the questionnaire and helped clarify a number of issues relating to the in-depth interviews. Pilot surveys were also carried out with twenty women.

In the questionnaire survey, limitations of time and resources did not permit me to conduct a preliminary house count and ruled out the possibility of designing a completely up-to-date sampling frame. The sampling frame obtained from the 1991 Census visitation records provided a listing of all the households in the area. Given the specific aims of the research, namely to interview women living with men or female heads, households consisting of a single male or a man and small children only were eliminated from the survey. Since the records were not disaggregated by ethnicity, surnames were used as preliminary indicators of ethnic background (similar methods have been used by Clarke 1986, for Trinidad). Substitutions were made in cases

Guyanese, Linden—were chosen, in which Red Thread had members. Given the lack of a current sampling frame to cover a settlement as large as Linden (the second largest urban centre in the country) it proved impossible to carry out a random sample. Given this constraint and the purposive nature of the survey, i.e. the desire to interview low-income women, a snowball sampling technique was used. The high level of economic and social homogeneity in these settlements, however, led to a good approximation of a random sample.⁴ An additional criteria in selecting the women in Linden was whether a member of their household had been retrenched from Linmine (the bauxite company) within the previous five years. Although a sampling frame for Meten Meer Zorg East could have been compiled given the small size of the settlement, the same method employed in Linden was used to ensure comparability of data collection methods.

All interviews were conducted by members of Red Thread (subsequently known as the Research Team): Doris Ali, Daywattie Lilman, Lalita Ramnaraine, Sheila Bhagwandin and Sunita Jailal (Indo-Guyanese women) and Sharon St. Louis, Wendy Wellington, Jennie Bell, Donna Plass and Yvonne Salmon (Afro-Guyanese women). The Indo-Guyanese women conducted the survey in Meten Meer Zorg while the Afro-Guyanese women worked in Linden. In preparation for this project I gave the Research Team three weeks of training in the basics of social science research, interviewing techniques and questionnaire design.

where the surname did not accurately predict someone's ethnic background, but these were relatively few. Replacement households were also used where a respondent could not be found, although the number of repeat visits that were made before the decision was taken to find another household was deliberately left flexible in light of the numbers of women working irregular hours in the informal sector. On average four attempts were made to find a respondent, at different times of the day. Partly because, on several occasions, I was taken to households by residents of the area there were few refusals (five in total).

Two lists of Albouystown residents were drawn up—one for Afro-Guyanese and another for Indo-Guyanese—and equal numbers of households were randomly selected from each. In all a total of 184 women—eighty-nine Indo-Guyanese and ninety-five Afro-Guyanese—were interviewed. All interviews were conducted between November 1992 and May 1993.

The design of the questionnaire was a collaborative effort; initially designed by myself it underwent a series of drafts after scrutiny by the Research Team and was then used as a pilot with a sample often women.

The women in Meten Meer Zorg East were easy to contact, many of them being at home or known to the interviewer. Hence, no-one needed contacting more than twice. In Linden up to four attempts were made to contact respondents. Although not all the interviewees were known to the Research Team a very high success rate was achieved (95 per cent). The high level of response can be attributed to Red Thread members conducting the interviews, which greatly allayed suspicions about the purpose of the research. Red Thread women had the ability to communicate freely with men and women of their own social class and ethnic group and have had many of the same experiences as the women to whom they spoke.

The interviews of the men were conducted last. The original intention had been to interview men in both Linden and Meten Meer Zorg but plans for the latter had to be abandoned given the violent reaction of the husband of one of the interviewers on his discovery that his wife would be interviewing men. Fifty men were interviewed in Linden, all of whom had been retrenched from employment in Linmine within the previous five years. Whereas all interviews with women took place within their homes the men were interviewed in beer gardens and rum shops and various other places. A total of 200

women were interviewed, 100 in each place. All interviews were conducted between March and May 1993.

The interviews

In each household, I asked to speak to the woman in charge—the female head or, where a man was identified as the household head, his wife/partner. Information was collected about her and her partner (where applicable) and the other members of her household. Each interview lasted between forty-five minutes to one and a half hours. Sometimes discussion continued long after the questionnaire had been completed. The data was coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSSX).

In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were carried out with twenty women—ten Afro- and ten Indo-Guyanese—at various stages in their life course, in different types of unions and households and with varying employment histories. The sub-sample was intended to be as representative as possible of the larger sample, but much also depended on women's willingness to tolerate a more extensive intrusion into their lives. These interviews were organised around several general themes: the

The interviews

In each household the eldest woman was interviewed. Interviews lasted from one to three hours. The questionnaires covered the following topics: demographic information on household structure, age, education and employment history as well as that of male partners; sources of income and patterns of household expenditure; overseas migration and its effects on the household; housing and services available; the routines of a typical day. The aim was to collect information on various areas of daily life that pertained to the way in which households engaged in production and reproduction. The data from these questionnaires were analysed using SPSSX. I spent each day in Meten Meer Zorg East at the home of a Red Thread member to check completed questionnaires and tapes. A similar process was followed in Linden (supervised by a paid employee).

In-depth interviews

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews covered similar topics to those in the questionnaires but the aim here was to build up composite pictures of individual women's lives. Interviews were conducted by the Research Team with fifteen Afro-Guyanese and fifteen Indo-Guyanese women, chosen on the basis of their representativeness of the larger sample from which they were drawn. Question areas included the following:

family history including where they were women's childhood; employment, residential, child-bearing and relationship histories; patterns of decision-making and budgeting; household division of labour; kinship networks and participation in organisations. Interviews were semi-structured, the intention being to allow each interview to gather its own momentum and to let the interviewees dictate the pace and direction of their responses. Thus, the 'stories' that were told did not always follow chronologically but rather emerged as women remembered issues or as they became more comfortable about discussing certain issues ('race' and abortion for example) with me.

Interviews ranged from six to fourteen hours and were spread over several visits. Given the sensitivity of some topics, none of the sessions was conducted in the presence of husbands/partners. However, other adult women and young children were occasionally present, often resulting in lively discussions as others, myself included, compared their own experiences and offered opinions. It was originally intended to tape the sessions, but the respondents were uncomfortable with the idea of having personal issues recorded. Instead, extensive notes were taken, as much as possible in the women's own words. At the end of each day, I added my own observations.

Secondary research methods

Participant observation techniques were also employed and involved attending meetings, religious and social

functions, visiting people's homes and talking with community born and grew up, number of siblings, how they were treated by their parents, the education they received; their employment history including dates and location of employment; their present household, what their partner (if any) did; children; their views on marriage, family and sexuality, including how they identified themselves; their views on community activities, politics and ethnicity; how they thought their lives had changed over the last decade; their access to health care and other services; their expectations for the future and what they wanted out of life. The data collected from these interviews were qualitative in nature and were analysed using a statistical package, Hyperresearch, as well as manually.

Interviews varied in length from three to eight hours and sometimes included more than one visit. All were taped and transcribed. These indepth interviews were not conducted in the presence of men but there were often other women and children present who were very willing to put forward their own views and experiences.

Secondary research methods

Information was also collected from discussions I held with a variety of individuals who provided background information on Guyana's economy, politics, history, trades

leaders as well as residents from Albouystown and the adjoining areas. Not only did this make my presence slightly less intrusive, it afforded me a much broader perspective on several issues.

In addition to the interviews with the women, a small snowball survey was conducted with eleven employers and an official from the government's central recruiting agency. Although not fully representative of the spectrum of work opportunities in the city, these interviews provided further valuable insights into the conditions of work facing low-income women in the city.

unions, the sugar and bauxite industries, NGOs and women's organisations.

Picturing women

The question of authorial representation raised a number of issues, perhaps the most central to our aims being how to refer to the participants of this study. The terms most commonly heard on the streets to denote racialised identities are 'Black', 'Indian' and 'East Indian'; 'African' is not so frequently used. The words 'coolie' and 'nigger' carry pejorative connotations that resonate with histories of slavery, indentureship and colonial representations of populations whose labours were naturalised on the basis of 'race'. At the same time their meanings are context-specific; thus, for example, 'coolie' and 'nigger' can be interjected comfortably where the tenor of the relationship between parties to a conversation is established and understood, without undesirable repercussions. Preferences also run along generational or ethnic lines: 'negro' is often used primarily by older persons as a form of self-description, but is shrugged off by younger Afro-Guyanese in favour of 'black' or 'mixed'. On the other hand 'negro' is referred to by Indo-Guyanese of all ages as a conscious sign of respect, while 'black' tends to be resorted to when a criticism is to be made (and often 'race' is explicitly returned to when such accusations are levelled by anyone).⁵ Thus 'a nice negro woman', but 'a tiefin' black man'. Similarly, the term 'Indian' is used by Afro-Guyanese as a label of respect while 'coolie' was the word that Afro-Guyanese predominantly reserved for insults.⁶

The moral of the story is that there is no innocence in naming. In light of the cultural politics of labelling and the specific resonances given to terms depending on who is doing the talking and where, we have deliberately chosen not to utilise everyday references to racialised ethnicities. Nor do we want to draw on externally imposed identities (which while sounding

politically correct to Western ears have no resonances within the country). We have instead drawn on the recognisable terms Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese to denote those identities that form the focus of this book. While emphasising a common nationality they also serve to specify distinct ethnicities, emphasising difference as a central component of contemporary Guyanese identity. We are aware that our use of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese may fall prey to another problem, whereby these terms stand for the whole and represent each group thus labelled as monolithic, complete and distinct entities. In contrast, as we have argued in Chapter One, we believe that it is possible to recognise the salience of ethnicity in the Guyanese context while rejecting any ontological and naturalised basis for its existence. Accordingly, Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese are taken throughout this text not as categories, the properties of which it is the project of this book to explicate, but rather as identities to be continually historicised and problematised (Scott 1988). They are used 'relationally, provisionally' (Boyce-Davies 1994:8) and as points of departure for investigating the multiple and intersecting dynamics of gender and ethnicity in three Guyanese communities.

Neither do we deny that such historical purity and lineage that these terms might imply is difficult, if not impossible to find.⁷ What is significant here, however, is the way in which groups of people, largely on the basis of (somatic) signifiers, are defined and recognised as 'other' in static and fixed registers. And this raises the sticky issue of how we represent those participants who described themselves as 'mixed'. The naming strategy we determined upon was to refer to Afro-Guyanese and Mixed-Guyanese as Afro-Guyanese. Two factors influenced this decision. In the first place, 'mixed' is itself a rather amorphous catch-all category for persons whose parents are not from the same racialised ethnic group; all of the 'mixed' women in the samples were partly Afro-Guyanese. However, identifying who was 'black' and who was 'mixed' was a highly ambitious enterprise and obviously related to perception, since (and hoisting ourselves on our own petard) persons we would perhaps have assumed were Afro-Guyanese said that they were mixed while others who appeared to be mixed stated that they were black or negro. The blurring of these boundaries also clearly emerged in the interviews, resulting in shifting identification that was context-specific. In particular, whenever marriage and male-female relationships were being discussed and differences between groups were identified, women who had designated themselves as mixed would speak of how 'We black people are different from Indians'. Similarly, Indo-Guyanese women spoke of 'We Indians' and 'Those black people'; when it came to the question of marriage, mixed persons were not identified separately. Additionally, there were no marked differences between Afro-Guyanese and Mixed-Guyanese in so far as marital patterns, household structure and labour force participation trajectories were concerned.⁸ In short, while we are aware that one cannot speak of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese as if they fully constitute two internally coherent groups, it is the

(construction of the) perceived distinction between Afro-/Mixed-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese which constitutes the main divide in this study.

Certainly we need to be wary of our own (suspect) acts of representation. A further concern of authorial representation is the extent to which not only our naming strategies and textual representations but also our research methods and the process of producing the text implicate us in the process of constituting the 'other'. In interviewing, categorising and even tabulating the women in this study were we subscribing to the construction of difference by producing a portrait of Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women for consumption by others? We believe that commencing our analyses from the experiences of Guyanese women's lives reduces the risk of attempting to construct subjectivities within a particular discursive terrain, i.e. one which interprets the other 'in terms and value judgements familiar to the author, scripting the other in their own lives and in the concepts available within their specific disciplinary and political grid' (Robinson 1994:247). This is not simply a rhetorical device, but a political and ontological imperative. Neither is this to deny the presence of our own subjectivities in the text, but our aim of focusing on embodied voices from specific places and times introduces a plurality of voices which we hope will undermine any notions of a fixed and transcendent authority). While our privileged subject positions were not erased they have hopefully been displaced and realigned by this strategy; there is a space for the voices of the researched in the discourse that we have constructed.⁹ At the same time our identities as a white British woman and a black/mixed Guyanese woman are merged in the authorial 'we'; simultaneously a fiction and a desire to highlight both the impurity of experience and the transformation of our own subjectivities that has taken place in the process of the research.

Border-crossing

In this section we explore the engagement between ourselves, as the principal researchers and members of Red Thread, the Research Team and the women interviewed for the research. These different but interwoven strata, the constant interrogation of subjectivities and the disparate (geographical and political) locations of all the women involved would, we hoped, disrupt the binary divide between researchers and subjects, creating a 'borderland' where we could fashion democratic practices to enable us to work together.

Although Alissa can (and does) speak as a Third World woman, neither of us presumes to speak for *all* Third World women. But we believe Third and First World women can work together. Spivak (1990) exhorts us to do so in a way that can be taken seriously by disenfranchised women, i.e. in ways that are authorised by dialogue with them and not just First World audiences.¹⁰ In this case it was Red Thread that provided a pathway between the spaces occupied by seemingly static and fixed subject positions of Third and First World women. In carving out a 'borderland' that would allow us to reconfigure

and renegotiate difference neither skin colour, national origin nor residence outside the country constituted fixed boundaries.

But it was precisely in this space—in practising research that would disrupt present systems of dominance—that new relations of inequality were being inscribed. Despite the conscious desire to work towards closing the gap between researchers and researched, to open up the spaces of mediation via the attempt to train Red Thread members in the techniques of doing research, the power relations underlying interactions between subject positions were insufficiently interrogated. Without constant reflexive questioning of ourselves and of the techniques we use to develop multivocality, our calls for democratic research practices are potentially suspect, not only silencing the voices of others but also colonising their perspectives (Duncan and Barnes 1992). In what follows we address each of our experiences to illustrate the different nature of the problems we encountered in our engagement in the mutual process of transforming subjectivities.

Linda's story

My discipline, geography, has only recently begun to investigate its complicity in the complex power relations of the imperial project. The legacy of that involvement on contemporary feminist knowledge has hardly been addressed but I wish to illustrate it here through discussion of a practice considered to be at the heart of geographical training, namely a mapping project conducted during the fieldwork period.¹¹ While the object of my research was to explore the representations and lived realities of Afro- and Indo-Guyanese low-income women's identities, it was working with the Red Thread Research Team, mapping Meten Meer Zorg East, that I became most acutely aware of the *mutual* constitution of identities and the painful possibilities of transformation.¹²

In the 1990s it is difficult to procure maps of Guyana in the country. Although many maps were produced prior to independence from British control, it has become almost impossible to obtain maps of the regional structure or of the coastal region. A decade ago they were available in a number of bookstores in Georgetown. Now one has to go to the Ministry of Lands and Surveys to procure them. More recently, with the increasing level of interest expressed by TNCs in acquiring land rights for logging and gold-mining, as well as ecotourism, copies of maps have begun to reappear in newspaper articles and hotel brochures (and undoubtedly in the head offices of the TNCs concerned), but maps are still unavailable to the general public.

Maps, however, are an iniquitous part of hegemonic discourses; for the British colonisers of (what was) British Guiana maps served as an analogue for the acquisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power.¹³ The British impulse to map the world was one with which I was personally familiar. As a child I had loved looking at maps. I also loved drawing them; there was always a huge sense of satisfaction in being able to order things and put them

in their place. I knew that this was knowledge. Denied the weekend outings that a family car would have provided I substituted the drawing of maps; they served as my window on the world. Later, in my training as a geographer (who managed to take degrees in which no courses on cartography were considered compulsory) I became intellectually aware of the social constructionism of maps, of the political purposes they served. In hindsight this awareness did nothing to rid me of the infatuating power of maps to speak for themselves. So entranced was I by their ability to transport me, I failed to fully comprehend the depth of my complicity in the promotion of their powerful way of seeing. Unaware, that is, until the process of naturalisation in which I was engaged, through the production of maps of fieldwork sites, became all too apparent.

Part of my intention in learning about the places of Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East was to produce maps, the ultimate signature of the 'true' geographer. As the Research Team and I paced around the perimeters of the village, measuring the land (rod by rod), one woman, Susan, casually announced she had a map of the village she had drawn herself.¹⁴ Seeing her map was a transformative moment; my attempts to engage in the transfer of skills was also serving as a conduit for the maintaining of relations of power and knowledge that constitute otherness. Susan, continuous in her praise of my educational qualifications, while simultaneously adamantly insistent on her inability to be learned, had already punctured that divide between those who know how to produce and read maps and those who do not. Why could I not have imagined that she could draw Meten Meer Zorg East squatting settlement in her own image? Whose agency, I had to ask myself, had I been presenting strutting around the place like the proverbial cock? What right had I assumed by showing the Research Team how to map the boundaries of a place that was their home?

Neither Susan nor I was recording a world that could actually be seen, we were recording worlds we each knew. But how did we know them and what did we choose to valorise? What we chose to document differed as did the worlds into which the knowledge these maps produced was disseminated. As Wood so cogently remarks,

Before the cultural content of the map can be naturalised out of existence, the natural content of the landscape must be culturalised into existence...As we know the map is not an innocent witness in this labour of occupance, silently recording what would otherwise take place without it, but a committed participant, as often as not driving the very acts of identifying and naming, bounding and inventorying it pretends to no more than observe.

(Wood 1992:78-9)

The differences in the rhetorical signatures of our maps were glaringly and immediately obvious (see Plate 2.1 and Map 6.1). My map was drawn by pencil on paper only to be reproduced by a professional cartographer using computer software. Susan's map, originally drawn with pen and paper, was transcribed by

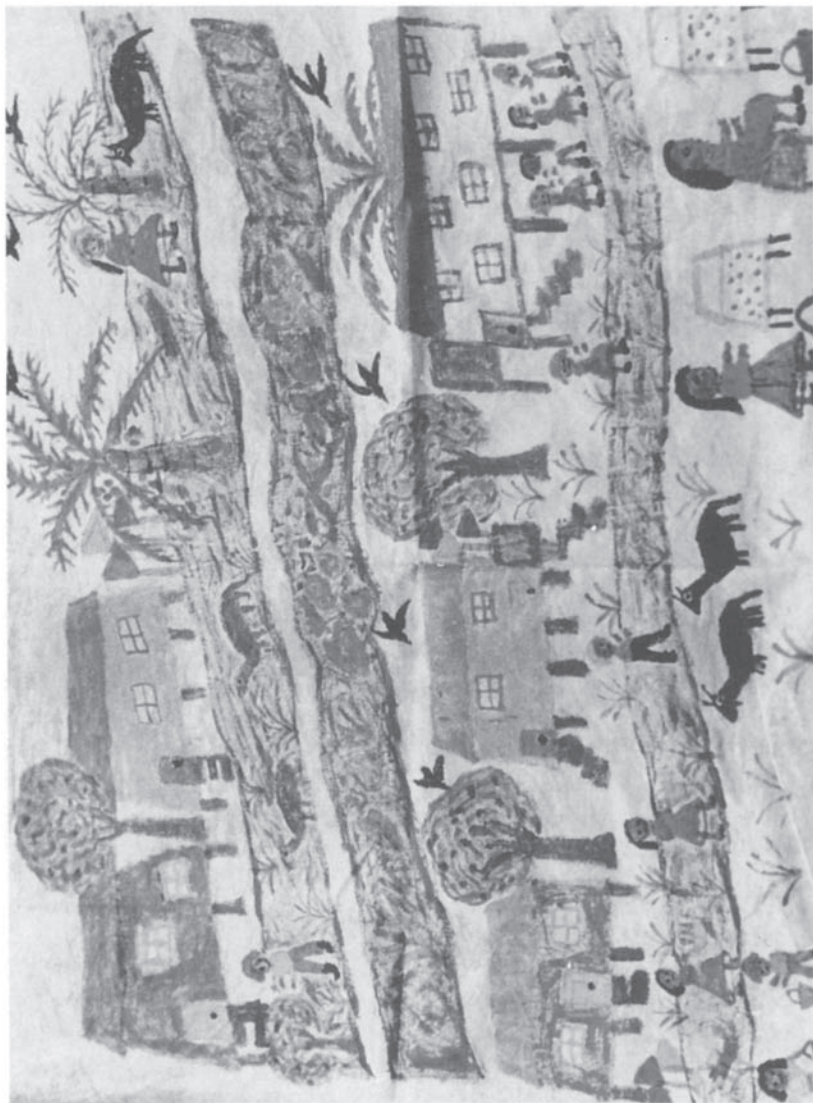


Figure 2.1 Susan's map of Meten Meer Zorg

herself as an embroidered design onto a cotton background. While both of us were engaged in the process of mapping, Susan recording the daily life of her culture, transforming her experience into something she could share, I was also busy map-making, constituting this mapped space as one that, through its coldly laid out co-ordinates of cane fields and canals, could be known by others like me. I had assumed my concern with precise measurement was indicative of professionalism. But what I was also establishing was Meten Meer Zorg East's place in the system of indentureship. 'We can only know this place through mapping its location in the colonial economic system out of which it arose' was the silent text that accompanied this map. An economic system, moreover, that I had disguised beneath an abstract, instrumental space. But this is the power of the map: 'It hides and denies its social dimensions at the same time as it legitimates' (Harley 1992:238). By mapping Meten Meer Zorg East in this way I had served to add yet one more layer to the litany that preserved the legitimation of such a system.

Of course, both maps represent particular historical geographies of the place that is Meten Meer Zorg East, namely the various absences and presences they embody. My map has no people, no sense of depth or colour. But while it had an absence of subjects it did have a subject. Meten Meer Zorg East's location in relation to the trenches and canals of the sugar estate make clear the primary reason for its existence, as a site for the reproduction of labour for the plantations and sugar estates. Susan's map is vibrant, peopled with smiling figures and interactions, providing a sense of the nature of daily life in Meten Meer Zorg East. It shows houses and yards, *jbandi* flags, animals and birds, women working and children collecting water, and the houses display the names of the women who live in them. The village is not placed in the spaces of the coloniser. It exists for itself; it does not even require the title that so neatly encapsulates the function of my map. Without a title there is no naming process, no claiming of the land, no transforming of land into territory, into property. The eye of my map is that of Donna Haraway's (1991) God trick, the omnipresent, all-seeing disembodied eye, that reflects (an identical replica of) reality. Susan's map eye is that of a view from somewhere, i.e. of local and of located knowledge.

However, while Susan's register makes no claims to veracity neither is it innocent of markings of power. Her map is also a contested terrain that can only be understood by reference to the concealments of meaning taking place. What Susan's map reveals is a self-enclosing and defensive place-identity; albeit a place of stability, security and stasis. Her representation is specifically that of an Indian village. Currently the village has only one Afro-Guyanese resident, the remainder having been forced out in the early 1960s race riots, prior to which the village was mixed. This is the text that Susan's map erases; it represents a collective memory obliteration of the West Coast Demerara prior to the race riots. Situated knowledges then are not necessarily progressive, neither do they necessarily act as sites of resistance; the racialisation of space,

through the process of 'ethnic cleansing', is not merely a capitalist or colonialist project. To imagine so risks falling into the fallacy of naïve 'Third Worldism' (Sidaway 1992).

Is a map of resistance of Meten Meer Zorg East possible? Who could legitimately imagine it without defending a view of reality that serves to eliminate 'others'?¹⁵ Both maps illustrate the difficulty of dislodging particular forms of power and authority but the maps also speak to other issues of relevance to us here. Both reveal the socially constructed boundaries of my and Susan's gendered and racialised ethnic identities. Our different experiences of gender are depicted in the roads; on Susan's map they appear to lead nowhere, on mine they link places of production and reproduction. Susan's world appears to be confined within the boundaries of the village, mine connect it to the world outside. Both maps also show that identities are constructed around (the power of) silences and both speak to the interconnections of gender with class and ethnicity.

While accepting that the author's intention is not fully determinative of the meanings that can be attributed to texts, i.e., that there are multiple interpretations by both producers and consumers, the two maps of Meten Meer Zorg East both serve specific purposes. They are embedded within discourses of power and knowledge, reflecting cultural values and social needs; they work well in reproducing the dominant values of the cultures from which they come. So do I. So does Susan. I continue to be shaped by the master practices of my discipline, just as much as the inherently conservative nature of the discipline fuelled my desire to further its feminist credentials. What this mapping project foregrounded was my slippage between the role of the dominant subject for whom the 'other' is conceptualised as someone who lacks the ability of self-representation at the same time as explicitly viewing the 'other' as having an agency that itself could become dominant.

What can white feminists learn from this encounter? First, and probably foremost, as Callaway (1992:30) asserts, '...[that] a deepening understanding of our own gendered identities and the coded complexities of our being offer the best resources for gaining insights into the lives of others'. This process necessitates the expansion of our imagination—not only, that is, to imagine that we understand the social locations of others (Harding 1992) but also to have a better objective understanding of our own social locations. Engaging in the reclamation of self and historical agency, i.e., becoming self-conscious about the specificity of our own positions by creating alternative interpretations of colonial histories and geographies, and replacing an (inadequate) sense of personal culpability with that of a social and historic responsibility for whiteness (i.e. white not only as skin colour but as ideological norm), feminist research can work towards being free of imperial inscription. That this requires participation in practical political work towards social change is highlighted by Frankenberg (1993) in her assertion that unlearning racism is not the same thing as ending it. In other words changing

what it means to be white—or being open to the possibility of a radical white identity—can only be achieved through praxis. How we move towards such a post-colonial moment we discuss in Chapter Nine where we examine the dynamics and possibilities of the multiracial women's organisation, Red Thread.

Alissa's story

Conducting research within our own societies, among those who look like us or share some of our experiences, raises the critical question of whether belonging to a community necessarily enables us to obtain more 'authentic' information than outsiders by virtue of gaining easier acceptance, having privileged knowledge, speaking the same language, recognising unspoken codes, or experiencing similar forms of subordination.¹⁶ Recent reflections have sought to show how multiple and cross-cutting social relations produce points of identification and dis-identification between researched and local researcher (Lal 1996; Williams 1996; Zavella 1997). This has led to consideration of the specific trajectories that shape our relations to communities with which we claim affiliation or which claim affiliation to us, seeking out those 'facets of self that join us up with the people we study, other facets that emphasize our difference' (Narayan 1993:680). Below I elaborate on how my own research experience, at 'home' in Guyana, neatly captured the paradoxes inherent in the term 'insider-outsider'.

I grew up in Guyana in the post-independence era in a middle-class family of mixed (predominantly Afro-Guyanese and Chinese) parentage. Versions and remnants of our anti-colonial past were communicated to those of my generation via history books, memories, a litany of nationalist songs, holidays, monuments and annual commemorative activities which blurred into compulsory displays of loyalty—rallies, marches, mass games—to the ruling regime. The race riots of the 1960s were less well known, but the legacy of that period was evident, whether in the ethnically homogeneous villages scarred by out-migration in the rural areas, the predominantly Afro-Guyanese civil service and armed forces, the ease with which one jumped to the conclusion that others (always others) were acting 'racial', or the everyday use of racialised rhetoric. The intransigence of the PNC was almost like a fact of life, although real cracks in its edifice had appeared by the time I left Guyana in the mid-1980s for university abroad. Unquestionably my research topic sprang less from an acquaintance with academic treatises on 'race' and ethnicity than from these experiences, an interest sharpened no doubt by my location as a woman of colour first in Canada and then Britain.

Yet the 'home' that I was returning to find as a student and field researcher in 1992 was not the same as the one in which I had been raised, although the linkages were always there (R.T.Smith 1988, 1996). I had never been to Albouystown, an area purportedly racked by poverty and crime. Given my

class and gender, this was not unremarkable, to know your place in relation to place. That I would opt to work in Albouystown, on the other hand, provoked much comment from persons not living there about the extent to which I was naïve, liberal, or just plain stupid. I was an intimate outsider, one whose connections to the area I had chosen reflected a personal history,¹⁷ just as they highlighted the inequities of resources, power and privilege denoted variously by my positions as a middle-class Guyanese woman, as a woman educated and coming from 'foreign', and as a researcher seeking permission to intrude on the space and time of those with the least to spare.

If as good social analysts we can make unfamiliar the taken-for-granted appearance of the worlds we inhabit (Narayan 1993), it is also possible that we may be complicit in the reproduction of inequality. Researching and writing against this colonising tendency involves an awareness of how we may constitute 'other' silences through our representations, and in the process inscribe our own unspoken positionalities. We walk a thin line indeed. As R.T. Smith (1996) suggests of Caribbean research, the frequent perception of ethnicity as fixed and overriding is as much (indeed some would say more) an aspect of academic production as it is an ongoing feature of social relationships in the region. In retrospect, this was reflected in the manner in which I originally framed my research question. By holding ethnicity 'constant', I was subscribing to the view that irreducible cultural divisions existed which would enable me to talk about and to Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women as separable groups trying to cope with the economic exigencies of adjustment policies. While initially this appeared to fit in well with my concern to demonstrate that most experiences of gender do not subscribe to the profoundly ethnocentric female subject of mainstream feminism (Mohanty 1991), it is differences (represented in a certain kind of way) which remain a bitter legacy of the anti-colonial period in Guyana. Yet my starting point was to take them as given.¹⁸

As I set out to explore how women's experiences in a low-income urban community were refracted through the lenses of ethnicity, the limits of the conceptual universe I had constructed became apparent. The everyday details of women's lives could not be compressed into tidy 'ethnic' categories or explained away as 'deviations'. The language of difference was constantly invoked (even, and sometimes particularly, among those women whose lives departed most radically from the cultural ideals they elaborated upon in our discussions), but the subjects identified by difference were just as constantly changing and overlapping. Ethnicity, then, was an integral aspect of women's self-identification, but it was negotiated, processual, relational.

This latter point was exemplified by my interactions with the women, foregrounding the fiction of my own distance from the field. Reflecting on her experiences as a researcher in Guyana, Brackette Williams (1996a) discusses how her identity as participant-observer had to be negotiated against the backdrop of how she was 'translated' by the community. As (and although) an

African-American woman, she was considered to be disloyal by some Afro-Guyanese women and men for spending too much time with those not like her (Indo-Guyanese), although whether her class position or being 'skinfolk' mattered more in interpretations of her actions depended on the context and the social identity of the translator. In contrast, I did not experience any resentment in the community regarding whose house I visited (or for how long), but this was not because I had successfully managed to establish such relations that my own social identity as anything other than a researcher could be ignored. To the residents of Albouystown, I was a middle-class Guyanese woman in a society in which colour continues to have associations with material and symbolic power. Thus among the Indo-Guyanese women, I was clearly not the same, but my 'mixture' was constantly referred to. It was raised early on in conversations, to find a certain kind of common ground based on 'blood' ties. The rhetorical question was frequently posed: 'You must have Indian in you somewhere,' but it served as well to distinguish me from 'the black people in this area' against whom the majority of Indo-Guyanese women contrasted their lives. For the Afro-Guyanese women, identification was far more straightforward. Whenever the subject of racialised differences came up in our discussions, I was included, often explicitly so: 'Indians not like me and you, you know, they different.' Belonging was, however, contingent. I was different too. My 'mixture'—again referred to through my hair or complexion, variously identified as 'fair', 'light', 'red', 'nice' and 'good'—was also a talking-point. While it is an insufficient (or no longer a necessary) passport to a 'better life' (there are women in Albouystown who look like me), it is recognised and understood to be social capital; in this sense, I am proof that it does count.

Given my research interests, I had assumed that the Afro-Guyanese women would open up to me more easily, and worried that the Indo-Guyanese women might find it difficult to discuss questions of ethnicity in Guyana with me. Looking back, I realise that this was because I was privileging ethnicity, and seeing it as constant. That I could be rendered differently (and acceptable) by both groups of women underlined not only the constructedness of racialised identity, but also the fact that this rendering was obviated by my own position in a shared class system, whether this was reflected by my access to both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese residents, or for example in my ability to occasionally 'hang out' in the streets without being stigmatised, while women in the area who do the same thing too frequently are seen as idle or possibly 'loose'.

These interactions raise troublesome questions about who has the power to name as different, an authority which obscures the relationships through which gender, class and ethnic identities are structured and inequalities sustained in the Caribbean (Douglass 1992; Lazarus-Black 1994; R.T.Smith 1996). A brief example from the field vividly illustrates this point. One woman, observing a family dispute taking place in full view of the street, laconically stated that the size and proximity of people's houses in areas like Albouystown

made it inevitable that one's 'dirty laundry would be aired' (the personal affairs of a household made public in the neighbourhood). She then turned to me and pointed out that middle-class communities (such as the one I came from) were exactly the same; what made *them* respectable and different was the fact that houses and yards were so large that familial privacy could be maintained. Hence they were seen as 'quiet' areas while Albouystown was 'loud'.

I would like to read this as an ironic comment on my own decision (and the biases which shaped it) to 'study Albouystown', and close by briefly mentioning three related responsibilities that choice might entail. First, complete access to a community does not exist for any researcher, however homegrown she or he may be, and necessitates an ongoing awareness in the field of one's location in relation to others. Second, acknowledging our positionality need not become an exercise in 'navel gazing' (Lal 1996:207), or lead us to abandon all field research as futile. On the contrary, it can strengthen our commitment to conduct good research based on building relations of mutual respect and recognition. It does, however, entail abandoning the search for objectivity in favour of critical provisional analyses based on a plurality of (temporally and spatially) situated voices and silences. It also requires us to seek out the hidden connections and power relations that are suggested every time that difference is presented as exotic, victim, or other. Finally, as feminist researchers we should not delude ourselves into thinking that the divide between researcher and researched is commensurable (perhaps most obviously in my case in the material differences which remain). As an 'intimate outsider', the work to transform the terms upon which my own privilege is both based and taken for granted also entails an engagement beyond the academy in the difficult task of generating alliances on the basis of careful and self-critical organising. In Chapter Nine we return to the issue of building a politics of connection by considering how Red Thread, amidst a climate of scarce resources and donor-set agendas, has committed itself to working through the dynamics of racialised ethnic and class identities among women in Guyana.

Conclusion

A necessary element of any investigation of identities is the ability to place the methodologies employed within the discursive power relations framing the project, allowing us to interrogate what is considered 'normal' and take on board the unexpected and uncomfortable. We hope our 'stories' have highlighted the contingent, non-linear processes of identity formation, processes which often require coming up against ourselves when we least expect it and that are brought into prominence when we find ourselves in a context of difference. They also serve as a sounding board for the formal aspects of our methodologies with which we commenced this chapter. Without an understanding of the discursive context within which questionnaire-based data are collected, figures on, for example, employment

rates or number of hours worked or family size are of limited use. Indeed, in what follows we have minimised our use of quantitative data, although we have used them to confirm the similarity of our findings and the extensiveness of certain practices. Rather, we have emphasised data from the in-depth interviews and our extensive ‘conversations’ and observations of everyday life in Guyana.

Notes

- 1 This point was made by Walter Rodney far before the recent fashion of allowing ‘the subaltern to speak’: ‘And so, this is the challenge to ask those of us who are not directly concerned right now to be self-critical in an examination of whether their own evolution is likely to proceed if they do not connect to a point of struggle’ (Rodney, quoted in Prescod 1976:128).
- 2 However, we should not overstate the authority of feminists and Third World academics who are not exactly at the centre of power relations in the academy, and this often impinges on the voice and even the types of work legitimately engaged in.
- 3 Although this was contingent on varied perceptions of Alissa’s ‘background’ and frequently complicated by her class position in Guyana, a point to which we will return later. Also, see Edwards 1990; Amos and Parmar 1984; Barrett and McIntosh 1985; Carby 1982, for discussions on the role of white women interviewing black women.
- 4 Given the non-random nature of Linda’s sample design and the limited usefulness this implied for parametric statistical analyses, quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive statistics, allowing us to summarise features of the sample populations and grant comparisons. While caution must be applied to any generalisations drawn from non-representative samples, the data collected are illustrative of responses being reported across the country (see Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994).
- 5 This is not to say that ‘black’ was reserved only as a pejorative descriptor by Indo-Guyanese. However, ‘negro’ was hardly used as negative association, although some younger Afro-Guyanese would today reject it as a colonial and paternalistic reference.
- 6 These terms are familiar to all Guyanese; a range of terms for other racialised ethnicities and varieties of mixture also exist, such as *chinee*, *putagee*, *pottocks*, *buck*, *dougl*, *all-nation*, *cook-up*.
- 7 Of course, in the Guyanese context one would probably have a hard time finding persons who are *not* mixed, despite their claims to purity. For a discussion of ‘mixed’ identity in Trinidad see Khan (1993).
- 8 Other researchers have also divided surveys into two groups. For example, see Abdulah and Singh (1984); Balkaran (1983); Roberts and Brathwaite (1962), who distinguished between Indian and Non-Indian populations. Wilson (1989), who analysed Mixed-Guyanese as a separate group, concluded that the most significant differences existed between the Indo-Guyanese and the rest of his sample.
- 9 We do not claim to have fully displaced our voices: we ‘chose’ which words to use and which parts of women’s lives to document. But the relational nature of this process is evident in that the women we worked with also chose which parts of their lives they gave to us.
- 10 As hooks (1984: preface) states, ‘Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live at the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that

could encompass a variety of human experiences...such theory...at its most visionary ...will emerge from individuals who have knowledge of both margin and center'.

- 11 But see, for example, Blunt and Rose (1996) and the special edition on fieldwork in *The Professional Geographer* (1994).
- 12 I am referring here both to the intersubjective creation of selves that occurs in the act of engaging in research, i.e. transformation through representation and the act of writing, as well as the transformation that takes place by and through the self-growth and the awareness that arise out of the inherently reflexive nature of the research process. My thanks to Sue Frohlick for raising this point.
- 13 This section owes much to a reading of Wood (1993) and Harley (1992).
- 14 Susan is a member of Red Thread. Unless otherwise stated all names have been changed as one of the conditions under which we guaranteed women's anonymity, especially given that pseudonyms were not used for the communities where we conducted the research.
- 15 To what extent is this question merely another turn of the screw? That is, of the authoritative academic—whose authority derives from and is implicated in the relations that produce otherness—sanctioning the conditions under which it will be decided what is of importance and what is not in the production of ethnographic narratives.
- 16 Feminist methods, methodology and epistemology have long been concerned with these issues. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex debate, earlier concerns were more likely to revolve around engaging in a critique of positivism, providing a voice and legitimacy for those (women) previously silenced by male-stream academic research, and working towards alternative methods committed to breaking down the hierarchy between researcher and researched. Increasingly the implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumption that women researchers were sympathetic insiders by virtue of their shared gender subordination has come under scrutiny with the recognition of divisions between and within women.
- 17 Both of my parents grew up in working-class neighbourhoods close by and adjacent to Albouystown. The spatial boundaries of this entire area were then symbolised through the term 'south of the burial ground', a cemetery serving to demarcate poor from established and emerging upper- and middle-class communities.
- 18 Thus even here, the inscription of otherness embodied in the term 'Third World women' was not displaced by my framing of the issue in this way; despite my intention to identify heterogeneity among women I was reifying difference, not seeking out connections.

THE EMERGENCE OF GUYANESE WOMEN'S IDENTITIES

Introduction

This chapter sets the wider historical backdrop against which the field-research will be discussed, contextualising our concerns with contemporary practices and identities. It offers a broad sweep of the canvas, not only because the issues raised require far more detailed enquiry than a single chapter can possibly afford, but also as a consequence of the paucity of available historical material, and the difficulty of finding reliable statistical data relating to Guyana. The historical overview is introduced here to emphasise that the identities which have today become solidified as Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese (and essentially different) are themselves the product of the dynamic and changing experiences of cultural reproduction forged by slaves and indentured labourers and their descendants under intensely brutal conditions, in which the meanings of tradition were renegotiated under conditions vastly different to the site of their original production. Our specific focus is on the constitution of differentiated gendered relations and identities through the colonial systems of slavery and indentureship. After discussing the conditions under which women laboured as slaves and indentured workers, we move on to discuss the forging of racialised stereotypes from the latter years of the nineteenth century, highlighting changing patterns of women's employment and the relation between work and family life up to Independence in 1966.

Women, slavery and indentureship

The Guiana coast, first sighted by Europeans at the end of the fifteenth century, became the site of expeditions and early settlements in the sixteenth century. The seventeenth century saw the formation of the Dutch West India company which encouraged Dutch traders to expand their activities in the three colonies of Berbice, Essequibo and Demerara (named after the three rivers which divide them) which today constitute Guyana (see Map 1.1). Early attempts to enslave the diverse groupings of the area's indigenous inhabitants (who as a result of the colonial encounter would come to be referred to as Amerindians) failed and were outlawed.¹ African labour was instead imported and Amerindians recruited to ensure the capture and return of runaway slaves.

Slaves were captured and brought mainly from 'Central Africa, the Bight of Benin, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra, and Senegambia' until 1807 when the slave trade was abolished (Viotti da Costa 1994:47).

The rich coastal soil of alluvial mud proved to be ideal terrain for the development of coffee, cotton and sugar plantations, the latter eclipsing the former two exports by 1810 (Higman 1984:63). Production on a large scale only emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century with the settlement of Demerara. In this respect, Guyana was a relatively 'late developer' in the plantation system that had come to characterise the wider Caribbean. This expansion was accompanied by a struggle for formal control (between 1780 and 1803, for example, Demerara alone changed hands six times between the Dutch, British and French). Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice were formally ceded to the British in 1814, although they had been occupied without interruption since 1803 and effectively were under British control at least a decade earlier. The colonies' administration was increasingly centralised; Demerara and Essequibo were first united and then merged with Berbice in 1831 to become British Guiana.

Under slavery women worked alongside men in the fields for equally long hours and were equally subjected to the routine physical torture that accompanied any resistance.² None the less some jobs were allocated differently, based on planter notions of sex-based skill, strength and authority, and reflected in their preferences for shipments of men, notwithstanding the fact that women proved to be as capable in the field as their male counterparts. The clearest division of labour was in the skilled trades, with men occupying the most prestigious trades and the jobs in the sugar mills. Female non-field hands performed domestically oriented work as midwives, nursemaids, seamstresses and laundresses, while both men and women worked as servants. The exclusion of women from skilled tasks reduced their access to some of the possible sources of income to be made from jobbing out. However, women were able to earn some money as hucksters, and dominated in the internal marketing of goods grown on provision grounds (Viotti da Costa 1994:51, 59–61).

Mothering, seen as a woman's job, was defined as secondary by planters to the role of female slaves as labourers, and local reproduction of the labour force was not an initial priority since replacements were made via the transatlantic trade in human cargo. It was not until the closing years of slavery, and particularly after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, that women's roles as reproducers would come to be identified as essential (Higman 1984:348–54), although in light of an unremittingly harsh work environment and women's resistance to bearing children into slavery, fertility rates continued to be low and infant mortality rates high (Higman 1984, Chapter 9; Viotti da Costa 1994:55–6).

Ideas and practices about domestic arrangements and responsibilities for slave women were generated in the spaces between the constraints imposed by the colonial regime and efforts on the part of subordinated groups at self-definition. Family life, for example, was always threatened by the fact that

persons could easily be transferred to another plantation at the directive of slave-owners. Despite these conditions, slaves forged families and kinship ties of enduring significance. While some conformed at least structurally to the nuclear household, other domestic arrangements—female-headed and polygynous house-holds—were also in evidence. Moreover, the form that the household took did not necessarily exhaust the meaning and range of family. Nor was it confined by the spatial limits of the plantation. Women drew heavily on the support of extended networks comprising other women for assistance in a variety of ways with domestic chores. Female heads with children engaged in relationships with both free men and slaves, on and off the plantations. Many had children with different men, a pattern which, when combined with women's responsibility for child-rearing, and the inheritance by children of their mother's legal status without regard for paternity (Viotti da Costa 1994:102), in all likelihood forged the primacy of the mother-child bond over one specific male—female relationship.

The divide between rulers and ruled was most effectively policed by the imposition of different marriage patterns which served as cultural markers of position within a system stratified along class-race lines. The family life of planters and managers, sanctified by marriage, was represented as both superior and essentially different. Legal marriage was for the most part denied to slaves who were considered to be heathen and inferior (it would also have contradicted the power of disposal planters had over their slaves, whereby individuals could be sold off to another plantation with little regard for the relationships they left behind). This did not prevent white men from engaging in sexual liaisons with slaves. These relations, which symbolised unrestricted access to the bodies of slave women, were conducted outside of marriage, ensuring the consolidation and reproduction of classed and racialised privilege (R.T.Smith 1987). Notwithstanding the passage in 1824 of an Order in Council including reforms to encourage marriage and forbid the splitting-up of slave families in Guiana and Trinidad (Reddock 1994:15–16), and while missionaries in the latter years of slavery devoted much of their time to promoting the moral superiority of a nuclear family based on Christian marriage (Viotti da Costa 1994:102–4, 147–51), such preoccupations with family practices did not become widespread until well after slavery had ended.

The abolition of slavery in 1838 precipitated the search for new sources of labour from Africa, the Caribbean, China, Portugal and predominantly India.³ Immigrants from India—mainly the United Provinces and Bihar—were brought to work as bonded labour as early as 1838, their contracts fixed at predetermined wage levels for a period of five years. By the time indentureship had ended in 1917, well over 200,000 Indians had arrived, with only some 32 per cent returning to India under the provisions of their contract (Look Lai 1993:37). There was a marked imbalance in the sex-ratio, with women on the estates ranging from a low of 11.3 per cent of the indentured population in 1851 to a high of 61.5 per cent in 1858.⁴

Relatively low birth-rates among the indentured population—between 1838 and 1869 it is estimated that some 18,000 women had been indentured but only 6,000 children were born (Mohapatra 1995:243)—suggest that, for the planters at least, indentured women were also seen first and foremost as labourers, albeit unequal to men. In the period immediately following slavery, gender stratification on the estates was institutionalised in the differential wages paid to ex-slaves and exemplified the conditions which female and male indentured labourers would come to face. Women were represented as less than able-bodied (male) labour, and constituted among the lowest-paid workers, earning less than men performing similar tasks (Rodney 1981:42–3).

The existence of a contractual wage relationship superseding Indian men's prerogatives over women's labour power combined with female scarcity to provide the context in which new relationships and identities were forged. For example, among Hindus (over 80 per cent of the recruited labourers), the small numbers of women made it difficult to adhere strictly to principles of caste endogamy. Women were able to save and remit monies to India. Domestic arrangements also varied, including: 'a single woman with or without a child, single women being visited by several men sequentially (the visiting union), woman with or without child passing through single male households, polyandrous household, a few polygamous ones and finally the typical monogamous household' (Mohapatra 1995:244). However, given the wage disparities, most women remained economically dependent on male support. While conjugal instability was relatively high, the common pattern was for women to leave one partner for another, especially if greater financial security was promised. Indentured women, already subject to the control of the indentured contract, were also the target of attempts by indentured men to restrict any efforts at female autonomy; wife murders, beatings and other forms of abuse were common features of estate life.

The policies and pronouncements of the colonial state demonstrate concerted incursions into and attempts to reorganise the intimate lives of labourers. Violence against women was depicted as an outcome of the imagined disorder of indentured family life, 'caused' by the supposedly rampant sexuality of female migrants of low repute (see Bronkhurst 1888; Josa 1915). As among slaves, family life among indentured labourers was seen as inferior and lacking respectability, a position which again did not acknowledge the existence of extra-legal relationships between indentured women and white men.⁵ Unlike slaves, indentured labourers were permitted to marry, but marriages not conducted according to Christian precepts or registered under the Heathen Marriage Ordinance of 1860 were void under the law, and the children of such unions considered illegitimate (Mangru 1987:214). This meant that weddings conducted under customary Hindu or Muslim rites were deemed null.⁶ These efforts to redirect family life of the indentured community by overriding the social significance of customary rites were abysmally unsuccessful, and the numbers of registered marriages remained low (Mangru

1987:214; Moore 1995:174). Regulation of marriage was not only the prerogative of the state; indeed in the post-indentureship period it would become a principal site around which the Indo-Guyanese community would stake a claim for cultural recognition and equality.

Slavery, indentureship and the production of difference

The similarities in the representations of slave and indentured women by the plantocracy as primarily producers (albeit inferior to male workers), the claims made over women's sexuality by planters and male partners, and women's efforts to challenge this control all suggest the limits of a simple cultural retentionist approach. None the less, the existence and implications of their overlapping practices were denied by 'the very structure of colonial society [which] created "racial groups" as the constituent units of the state' (R.T. Smith 1996:9), and relied on their unequal and differential incorporation into Guianese society. It is to the implications of inequality and difference that we now turn our attention.

Guiana's social structure prior to 1838 could be said to consist of three tiers. At the apex were Whites (the British) who constituted the political and economic élite. A middle stratum comprised free persons of colour, with the largest section at the bottom occupied by the black slave population.⁷ This three-tier system was profoundly changed by indentureship. The aftermath of emancipation was marked by efforts on the part of ex-slaves to procure land and establish villages away from the estates. The 'Village movement' was perceived as a direct threat to planters' control over the workforce, and led to the passage of a series of ordinances designed to restrict the sale of land and cripple villagers' autonomy in the management of their own affairs (Adamson 1972; Farley 1954:100). The challenge to planter authority resulted in the eventual replacement of this workforce by indentured labour, leading to an exodus of village men and women to urban and hinterland areas in search of work (Rodney 1981).

Indentured workers from India remained for the most part tied to the sugar estates, and opportunities for economic diversification did not arise until the latter years of the nineteenth century.⁸ In this regard, post-emancipation contrasted sharply with the conditions facing ex-indentured workers, with significantly different implications for women. With indentureship coming to an end, and motivated by the need to maintain a secure labour supply, land grants were initially offered to time-expired immigrants who commuted their return passages to India. The prohibitive land laws that had crippled the village movement were also liberalised. The reduction in land prices precipitated a movement into villages between 1898 and 1911, much as the ex-slaves had done after 1838, and the effects on the incipient rice industry based largely on small-scale farming were significant (Potter 1982). Such policies, however, were less preoccupied with the growth of a viable and independent peasantry than with the creation of small family-based holdings on lands contiguous to the

estates, which would not conflict with the demands of sugar, but rather would supplement the low earnings of labourers.⁹ The changing emphasis from immigration to settlement, combined with technological changes in the sugar industry, would eventually result in the marginalisation of women from the estate workforce and the relocation of their labour to the family plot (Mohapatra 1995:246–9; Trotz 1996a).

The resulting occupational segregation was attributed by the colonial state to the cultural propensities of racialised groups, obscuring its emergence from the organisation of production. As Brackette Williams points out, '...the elite, after it had manipulated the allocation of economic roles, justified the successes (or failures) of different ethnic groups by their alleged relative racial (physical and intellectual) and cultural (value orientations and institutional forms) inferiority' (Williams 1991:151). Nor were these stereotypes static. For example, slaves, once considered the most suitable labour for the estates, were increasingly characterised as lazy and undisciplined villagers in the post-emancipation period. Indentured immigrants from India, on the other hand, were depicted as docile and hard workers, although significantly whenever they could not be sufficiently disciplined they were just as likely to be dismissed as indolent (Rodney 1981:54). Representations of women also shifted. The dominant colonial images of female indentured workers as promiscuous and immoral were not unlike those which had been used to describe women under slavery and after. However, the emerging labour regime at the end of indentureship would occasion (and was itself partly occasioned by) the 'remaking' of the Indo-Guyanese woman as chaste, tradition-bound and above all, domestic, in contrast to her unruly, domineering and immoral Afro-Guyanese counterpart. In the remainder of this chapter we explore how these shifting images were produced out of the needs of the colonial state for labour and the efforts of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese to resist their subordination.

Women's employment from colonialism to Independence

In the mid-nineteenth century women constituted almost half of the formal labour force, yet by Independence in 1966 they formed just over a fifth. It was in this period, we argue, that women's identities were to shift from being producers to reproducers (also see Reddock 1994 for Trinidad). Table 3.1 illustrates the changing structure of women's employment from the mid-nineteenth century to the eve of Independence in 1966. The main elements were women's increasing marginalisation from wage work, socio-economic diversity and continued inequality *vis-à-vis* men (Peake 1993).

Georgetown, as the primary urban centre, became a target destination for Afro-Guyanese migrants from rural villages and sugar estates, displaced by the introduction of indentured labour. Employment was to be found in retail stores and import-export businesses, the civil service, professions or the informal

Table 3.1 Women's formal occupations in British Guiana, 185 1–1960

Year	Domestic servants		Agricultural workers		Other workers		Women in the workforce	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1851	*5,547	6.0	—	—	—	—	—	—
1861	9,100	22.0	28,674	69.3	3,583	8.6	41,357	46.2
1871	8,484	15.6	37,606	69.1	8,320	15.3	54,410	39.7
1881	14,563	21.4	40,833	59.9	12,793	18.7	68,189	40.7
1891	19,934	26.4	41,162	54.4	14,516	19.2	75,612	41.2
1911	29,867	35.4	40,923	48.5	13,527	16.1	84,317	44.1
1921	30,007	39.1	31,126	40.5	15,679	20.4	76,812	43.1
1931	16,314	33.2	18,754	38.1	14,122	28.7	49,190	33.5
1946	13,314	22.8	13,613	33.5	13,653	33.6	40,580	27.8
1960	13,944	38.0	9,307	25.4	13,405	36.6	36,656	22.7

Source: Adapted from Peake 1993

*Includes men and women

sector. Some migrants continued to work on sugar estates on the outskirts of the city. Men took up jobs as gardeners, watchmen, dock workers, found work in sawmills and other small factories, monopolised skilled trades as carpenters, plumbers, masons and wheelwrights, or became clerks and lower-level public service officers. The majority of women worked as domestic servants and washerwomen—in 1921 nearly four out of every ten women worked as domestics—which were easily among the lowest-paid occupations in the city. Others made a living as dressmakers, seamstresses in small garment enterprises, market vendors and prostitutes (Khayum 1990; Rodney 1981:200–10). Upper-class women involved in charitable work saw it as part of their socially uplifting mission to promote education—albeit along narrowly gendered lines—for girls at the turn of the century (Peake 1988). The provision of scholarships to various secondary schools enabled some women to acquire the requisite skills for employment as teachers, nurses and public servants in the lower rungs of the civil service.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, agriculture declined significantly as an employer of female labour owing to the restructuring of the sugar industry (Mandle 1973:76). The result, by the 1940s, was a dramatic fall in female employment, notwithstanding women's visibility in struggles for improved conditions (WPO 1983). By 1960 just a quarter of the female labour force remained formally employed in the agricultural sector. Indo-Guyanese as well as remaining Afro-Guyanese women sugar workers predominantly transferred their labour to the informal agricultural sector, whether for subsistence on family plots or for sale in domestic markets. In this they were continuing a tradition which had developed since slavery and was dominated by female producers throughout the Caribbean (Mintz 1981). Certainly, the

overall decline of employed women to 23 per cent by 1960 suggests that the formal labour market was largely incapable of absorbing the vast numbers of women displaced from agricultural work.

Jobs outside of the agricultural sector were limited, mainly in the informal sector and concentrated moreover in urban centres. Thus, the reduction in the number of women in the formal agricultural workforce disproportionately affected the Indo-Guyanese population, the vast bulk of whom lived in rural areas and were located within this sector. The withdrawal of large numbers of Indo-Guyanese women from the sugar estates did not lead to large-scale migration to the cities; most remained in the rural areas where they played an integral role in peasant production. The small numbers who did move to urban centres were largely restricted to such informal activities as selling milk and vegetables (Khayum 1990).

The marginalisation of Indo-Guyanese women from the labour market was further facilitated by their unequal access to education. Notwithstanding some missionary involvement (S.Mangru 1993), the provision of education for indentured labourers was not initially considered to be a priority, given the importance of their labour for the viability of the sugar estates (Bacchus 1989:22–3). At the turn of the century the Sweetenham Circular exempted the children of indentured labourers from the 1876 Compulsory Education Act, and stipulated that parents who opposed sending daughters to school should not be penalised. The exemption remained in force until 1933 (Seecharan 1997:273). Later, and once it was officially acknowledged that ex-indentureds were a permanent part of the fabric of Guyanese society, education became a means of imposing cultural and religious assimilation. Indo-Guyanese were required to convert to Christianity and change their names if they wanted to qualify for jobs as teachers and clerks. Many parents refused to enrol their children in schools, especially daughters, in light of the lack of job opportunities for women. By 1930 there were twice as many boys as girls in primary school (Bacchus 1989:30; see also Seecharan 1997:260–73; S.Mangru 1993). The consequence was that whereas social mobility for Afro-Guyanese came to be closely associated with the civil service, for Indo-Guyanese it was entry into agriculture or independent retailing activity and later the professions which would become the preferred means through which they sought to overcome discrimination. As Seecharan (1997:250–1) notes, emerging rural and urban Indo-Guyanese businesses were heavily dependent for their success on the (often unpaid) contributions of female family members.

To sum up, notwithstanding the fact that slave and indentured women came to Guiana as labourers in a context in which households and families played no part in the decisions concerning the disposal of female labour power, formal employment would come to be principally identified with men and accompanied by an ideology of male breadwinner/female housewife by the mid-1960s. That these changes were not uniformly experienced helped consolidate the production of racialised groups and identities. Afro-Guyanese women had greater access to education and urban jobs, but their secondary

status was underlined by low and irregular wages. The majority of Indo-Guyanese women, on the other hand, remained in rural areas, with few if any opportunities for learning skills or participating in production outside of family structures.

Work and family life

Reconfigurations in the gender division of labour also wrought modifications at the level of family and domestic life. The emergence of villages following the abolition of slavery led to the withdrawal of many women from the estates, although it was never complete and large numbers of women continued to work. While declining demand for women's labour led to their marginalisation from the sugar estates, additionally investments in their homes, families and the re-creation of communities may have acted as an impetus for women themselves to leave the labour force.

The displacement of the ex-slave plantation workforce following indentureship had profound implications for work and family life. As mentioned, Afro-Guyanese men and women migrated to urban centres in large numbers, with men also moving to the hinterland regions where employment opportunities—in gold-mining, diamond-prospecting and timber—were emerging. A similar process took place following the First World War with the establishment of the bauxite industry. Male out-migration left many Afro-Guyanese women heading their households in the villages, increasing the imperative for them to seek jobs. In the urban areas female-headed households were common, suggesting not only that women migrated to the city on their own, many sharing crowded rooms with other women, but also that access to employment may have provided them with some flexibility—albeit highly constrained—in defining their lives in relation to men (Rodney 1981:207).

While some female employment was accepted as a necessary feature of the urban landscape by the colonial government, the apparent independence of Afro-Guyanese women and the preponderance of non-marital and non-residential relationships were decried as incapable of sustaining a stable family life and liable to produce criminal elements in society. Afro-Guyanese women were depicted as promiscuous, belligerent, and lacking in sexual mores, and were blamed for what was diagnosed as the moral degradation of working-class life (Kirke 1898). In 1853 less than 1 per cent of the emancipated population was legally married (Moore 1995:103), and while this caused consternation only among religious figures during the slavery period, it was now redefined as a general problem.

The task élites set themselves was to present Christian marriage based on female domesticity as the sole respectable union, and to reverse patterns of relationships among the Afro-Guyanese poor. These concerns would increasingly come to be shared by an emerging non-white middle class. Various efforts can be traced up to the mid-twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century a religiously organised

campaign attempted to encourage poor couples to marry inexpensively, but it was largely unsuccessful (Moore 1995:110). A Royal Commission of Inquiry which reported just after the Second World War called for religious and educational institutions to play a leading role campaigning against illegitimacy and promiscuity, and promoting the values of marriage. Notwithstanding these strenuous efforts to implement 'corrective' measures, consensual unions, female headship and low marriage rates remained prevalent.

The official position was that these practices were specific to the poor. Yet, as we noted earlier in this chapter, extra-legal relationships have historically permeated all social strata in colonial Guiana. Their redefinition as a problem of/for the poor from the late nineteenth century onwards was part of a discourse of respectability that would increasingly come to be taken up as a necessary symbol of social distance between an emerging non-white middle class and the origins of many of its members in poverty. Nor should the emphasis on the *appearance* of respectability obscure the fact that the dual marriage system (marriage among status equals and extra-legal liaisons among status unequals) continued to operate for élite men (R.T.Smith 1987).

At any rate preoccupations with the 'disorderly' relationships of the poor were bound to miss the ways in which people did order their lives. They also overlooked the diversity of domestic arrangements that existed and how these may have been influenced by such factors as land, place of residence and women's employment. In rural areas, female centrality within the domestic domain (matrifocality) did not translate into dominance or equality in marriage, common-law or non-residential relationships (R.T.Smith 1956). In urban areas, and where women's access to work was greater, female-headed households were relatively commonplace among the poor, but given the inequality in wage levels this did not mitigate women's economic dependence on men, or the value attached to 'having a man'.

The family life of Indo-Guyanese in the post-indentureship period was also the subject of debate, albeit motivated by a somewhat different set of concerns. Ultimately the effect of land settlement and the growth of a peasantry was the relocation of women's labour to the domestic economy, secured in a family unit based on the authority of the male head. Official discussions and policies from the late nineteenth century reflected this change. The latter years of indentureship witnessed intensified efforts to regulate familial life through the control of women. By the 1930s and 1940s female employment was being described as a temporary aberration; for example, the 1949 Venn Commission of Inquiry into the Sugar Industry in British Guiana recommended that women be trained in such areas as embroidery and dressmaking to groom them for marriage and motherhood. In this they were supported by representatives of the male labour force, who utilised these images to argue for higher wages for men as household heads.

The large-scale marginalisation of Indo-Guyanese women in the workforce was thus the combined result of Indo-Guyanese men's efforts to control their

wives (which can be traced back to the indentureship experience), the restructuring of the sugar industry and the ideological hegemony of the male breadwinner model (see Reddock 1988, 1985b on Trinidad), although the correspondence between these various processes is far from straightforward. For example, the status of weddings performed according to customary Hindu and Muslim rites was a point of contention, suggesting that constructions of family among Indo-Guyanese could and did often diverge from the colonial project. The Indo-Guyanese community insisted on state recognition of these marriages without registration, a matter that was finally resolved in 1958. Similarly, from the point of view of the sugar estates, the removal of women from employment was meant to be a gradual and non-disruptive process, and objections were registered by planters faced with women withdrawing from work in large numbers at the turn of the century, much as the ex-slaves had done (Shahabuddeen 1983:192).

In this regard, it is insufficient to portray Indo-Guyanese women's retreat from wage labour entirely as an imposition, particularly in light of the material realities of their working conditions. The specific forms the family took in the post-indentureship period were inextricably linked to access to land. This facilitated not only the reproduction of the workforce but also kinship rules and practices such as the joint family unit, the emphasis on female domesticity and the authority of the male head, all of which would come to be represented as evidence of cultural retention or an unbroken continuity with India. To see this entirely as the actualisation of the interests of Indo-Guyanese men is to overlook the stake which Indo-Guyanese women may also have had as members of a historically oppressed group to return some measure of control to their lives outside the plantation economy by investing in marriage and the family, even if that meant trading one form of control for another.

Nor was that control ever complete or non-negotiable. Anthropological work begun in the 1950s noted that Indo-Guyanese domestic arrangements did not all conform to these ideals and were not bracketed off from wider factors operating in Guyanese society. For instance, among Hindus the relevance of caste in influencing marriage patterns varied across communities, and in all cases other factors such as education and socio-economic status attenuated efforts to observe caste endogamy. Marital disruption also occurred and female domesticity was not always possible under conditions of severe economic hardship (Jayawardena 1960, 1962, 1963).¹⁰ Notwithstanding these changes, marriage continued to retain symbolic importance in the denotation of Indo-Guyanese identities.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to trace the processes through which Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese identities were constituted, emphasising that they were forged and reformed in the colonial process and were neither completely

different nor unchanging. The view that each group followed culturally separate scripts (see Moore 1987, 1995) is thus difficult to maintain.¹¹ None the less, given the production of difference through the process of racialisation 'it was hardly surprising that each such group should begin to emphasise the worth of its particular historical "culture", rediscovering and, if necessary, inventing traditions' (R.T.Smith 1996:9).

Moreover, the context surrounding the introduction of indentured immigrants to the colony produced a situation in which Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese would come to partly recognise themselves and each other in the colonial stereotypes that named them as inherently different. Not only was indentureship used to defeat the demands by villagers for improved working conditions, but the latter were effectively paying for their own obsolescence in that the system was vastly subsidised by the colony. Initial concern with the plight of indentured workers gave way to sustained opposition to immigration. Although much of this hostility was directed against the government, indentured labourers were also derided as strikebreakers and, with their 'coolie culture', as lacking loyalty to Guiana as well as the requisite attributes of 'Englishness' or social whiteness (Rodney 1981:180). On the other hand, Afro-Guyanese were considered physically inferior (Look Lai 1993:255; Secharan 1997:356), the other aspect of whiteness in colonial society. Notions that each group was intrinsically different and culturally predisposed to certain types of activities were helped by relative residential and occupational segregation and low rates of intermarriage. The planters, for whom the benefits of a divided workforce were obvious, actively cultivated mutual suspicion and distrust along racialised boundaries. The inversion of the image of Indo-Guyanese women in the post-indentureship period to emphasise their 'traditional' domesticity, chastity and virtue now contrasted sharply with the representation of Afro-Guyanese women, who remained tainted with the image of sexual promiscuity and disorderliness. As descriptions/explanations of each group's position, these stereotypes erased the specificity of the colonial legacy, deflecting attention away from those women who did not 'fit' as well as from an examination of how cultural practices around kinship and the family were forged in the crucible of colonial rule and gendered and racialised subordination.

Notes

- 1 There are presently nine Amerindian nations in Guyana's hinterland region: Arawak, Caribs, Warao, Patamona, Macushi, Akawaio, Arekuna, Wapishana and Wai Wai (Colchester 1997).
- 2 Slave women were also just as likely to resist, whether this took the form of individual acts of defiance or participation in rebellion. For Guyana see Viotti da Costa 1994. For the Americas see Gaspar and Hine 1996, Shepherd *et al.* 1995.
- 3 Although indentureship was purportedly based on voluntary migration and a formal contract between equal parties before the law, inequality was fundamental to the

- relationship, not least through the provision for criminal sanctions for any breach of a civil contract.
- 4 Quotas for females were set by the Colonial Government, but these were hardly adhered to. The ratio was fixed at 35 women to 100 men in 1857, later increasing to 50:100 in 1860. After protests from the planters, the second proposed rise was set aside and the issue not revived until 1868, when it was reduced to 40:100 (Laurence 1958; Mangru 1987). On the whole the numbers of women and men did not equalise until after indentureship had come to an end in 1917.
 - 5 However, these double standards were overlooked once such relationships remained extra-legal, and were the focus of comment only when they led to conflicts between indentured men and managerial staff and threatened production (Trotz 1996a).
 - 6 New legislation introduced in 1894 did grant recognition to marriages conducted according to Hindu or Muslim custom and raised the legal age of consent for females from twelve to thirteen years, but required the fulfilment of a number of lengthy bureaucratic procedures (Danns and Shiw Parsad 1988; Mangru 1987:213).
 - 7 Amerindians were marginal to this coastal classificatory schema, located symbolically beyond 'civilisation'. Although the racialisation of class was the basis that formed the underpinning of slavery, the system was neither completely closed nor static. The free coloured population occupied an intermediate space between slave and planter, and it would be members of this group who would first achieve limited forms of social mobility. Fluidity became especially pronounced after the abolition of slavery, through the growth of a non-white middle class. This was not to imply that racialisation had become irrelevant to the social structure. Education and religion were now seen as the means through which law and order would be maintained, and the social attributes and mores of English culture inculcated into the freed population. For women this meant the acceptance of the ideal of Victorian respectability and domesticity. Social 'whiteness' accompanied upward mobility and did not require the associated phenotypical characteristics (although inter-marriage with lighter-skinned persons—marrying up—was also prevalent), but it was also clear that in a context in which whiteness was valorised, the ideal could only be emulated, but never perfectly achieved or attainable (R.T.Smith 1992).
 - 8 Immigrants from Africa and Caribbean islands tended to move off the estates and become absorbed into neighbouring villages. Indentured labourers from Portugal were released from their contracts at an early stage. With the assistance of planters and the colonial government, they were able to become landowners, and to establish for themselves a dominant role in the small trade and retail sectors (Menezes 1986; Rodney 1981). The Chinese did not benefit from such support but nevertheless also managed to move into business; by the late nineteenth century their visibility in the small trade sector would come to challenge the dominance of the Portuguese (Look Lai 1993).
 - 9 Planters, during the depressions of the 1880s and 1890s, began the practice of allotting unused portions of their estates to indentured immigrants to farm on, provided that such time did not conflict with the demands of the sugar crop. The small plots were used to grow provisions, rear livestock and cultivate crops, and would come to rely increasingly on women's labour (Mohapatra 1995).
 - 10 More recently Mohammed Rauf (1974), in his study of a village community, noted that arranged marriages were rarely practised among younger couples, for whom individual choice and 'love' matches were stressed.
 - 11 As Rodney (1981:179) has pointed out, this point is even more forcefully made if we extend our analysis of culture to include 'their work environment and their responses to capital at the point of production'.

THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION OF GUYANESE WOMEN

Introduction

If the basis for the emergence of 'myths of primordial identity' in Guyana (R.T. Smith 1996:10) was laid in the colonial practices of the nineteenth century, the reasons for their mobilisation along lines which have pitted racialised groups against each other must be sought in the dynamics of the anti-colonial struggle and its tragic aftermath.¹

By the late nineteenth century economic diversification and education had paved the way for the emergence of a non-white middle class that was increasingly dissatisfied with its lack of say in local politics. It found a constituency in the politically and economically marginalised labouring population, who expressed their sense of injustice principally through extra-parliamentary action. After the end of the Second World War, the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was formed (1946), a largely middle-class group whose members described themselves as scientific socialists. One of its founders was Cheddi Jagan, who had extensive support from the largely Indo-Guyanese sugar workers. In 1950 Jagan joined forces with Forbes Burnham, who had cultivated a sizeable following among the Afro-Guyanese working class, to establish the People's Progressive Party (PPP). Universal adult suffrage was eventually achieved in 1953, and elections held for limited self-rule. The PPP swept to power with 51 per cent of the vote on a pro-labour, anti-colonial platform, to become the first democratically elected Marxist government in the Western Hemisphere.

In light of the PPP's demands for independence, and the threat it was seen to pose for both foreign and local capital, international reprisal was swift. The British Government suspended the Constitution on the grounds of a communist conspiracy, putting in its place an interim government of nominated members with only an advisory mandate (Hintzen 1989; Jagan 1966).

The external pressure that was brought to bear on the PPP highlighted internal differences within the party, splitting it into two camps in 1955. The contest for national power gradually assumed racialised dimensions. By the time the Burnham faction of the PPP was renamed the People's National Congress (PNC) in 1957, the parties were irrevocably divided, with Indo-

Guyanese largely supporting Cheddi Jagan and the PPP while Afro-Guyanese backed the PNC (Hintzen 1989). With the restoration of limited self-rule in 1957, the PPP was returned in elections held in 1957 and 1961 under a first-past-the-post system. In 1964 proportional representation was introduced, following widespread disturbances and race riots covertly supported by the American and British governments (Hintzen 1989; Schlesinger 1965). This enabled the PNC to join forces with another party, the United Force (UF), to form a coalition government, despite the PPP winning the largest single bloc of votes. In 1966 Guyana attained political independence, with Forbes Burnham at the helm.

United only in their opposition to the PPP, the coalition was little more than a marriage of convenience; by 1967 the UF was effectively excluded from power. If proportional representation was initially the means through which the dominance of the PPP could be effectively challenged, massive electoral fraud became the principal mechanism for the entrenchment of the PNC in political office from 1968 to 1992 (Colchester 1997; Latin American Bureau 1984).

How has this winner-takes-all game for political power affected—and been affected by—the contemporary dynamics of global economic realities, and what have been its implications for women in particular? While the experiences of slavery and indentureship shaped many features of women's lives into the late twentieth century, in this chapter we focus on the development strategies pursued since Independence which have solidified women's identities as mothers while their effects have been to increase women's participation in the labour force. After providing an overview of Co-operative Socialism and the more recent neo-liberal economic reforms, we consider the gendered effects of both sets of discourses for women's access to material and symbolic resources. The specific emphasis here is on shifts in women's employment in the contemporary period as well as concomitant changes in marriage patterns and household forms. Finally, and against this broader backdrop, we narrow our focus to the employment and household characteristics of the women in the surveys.

From Co-operative Socialism to structural adjustment

After Independence in 1966, and following an initial attempt to diversify the economy through foreign investment, the PNC launched a radical policy change in 1970 and declared Guyana a Co-operative Socialist Republic. Under the slogan of 'feeding, clothing and housing the nation' the government embarked on a programme of self-reliance, co-operative management and changes in the structure of ownership. Housing became a national priority while a policy of free education was introduced. The bauxite and sugar industries were also nationalised. By the end of the decade, over 80 per cent of the economy had come under government ownership (Baber and Jeffrey 1986).

As C.Y.Thomas (1984, 1988) has noted elsewhere, notwithstanding political rhetoric, Co-operative Socialism consolidated resources in the hands of the state. Political authoritarianism combined with state command over the economy to provide an indispensable means of controlling the population (Milne 1981).² Resources were largely distributed along partisan and racialised lines. Nationalisation resulted in an expansion of jobs within the government bureaucracy, and disproportionately favoured Afro-Guyanese (Hintzen 1989). Expenditure on agriculture, the sector in which Indo-Guyanese were predominant and where the major opposition party, the PPP, enjoyed its strongest support, declined (Debiprashad and Budhram 1987). Not surprisingly, these measures further alienated Indo-Guyanese and intensified perceptions that the government was ruling on behalf of its Afro-Guyanese constituents.

In fact, the co-operative and state sectors became channels of accumulation for a small cabal of ethnically diverse élites, and there was a marked absence of worker participation and control. The gap between socialist rhetoric and economic reality became increasingly apparent from the mid-1970s, following the oil price rise of 1973. Partly the result of adverse terms of trade (sugar, bauxite and rice remained Guyana's primary foreign exchange earners), the decline of the economy also stemmed from the regime's lack of legitimacy, unsustainable state expansion, economic mismanagement and corruption and declining worker morale and productivity (Thomas 1988).³

The deterioration of the economy eroded the basis for sustained patronage, precipitating mobilisation across racialised lines. The Government's response, to extend its hold over civil society, reached its peak in 1980 with the assassination of (among others) Walter Rodney, a prominent member of the Working People's Alliance (WPA), a political party which, although only constituted in 1979, had gained extensive support across racialised allegiances. Such support was indicative of the extent to which government practices were supporting neither Afro-Guyanese nor Indo-Guyanese, and posed the largest threat to the Government's hold on power.

Far from delivering on the pledge to feed, clothe and house the nation, the period of Co-operative Socialism witnessed endemic corruption; growing disinvestment in the social services; a virtual collapse of public utilities; high unemployment; scarcities of basic necessities; and rising inflation levels. The parallel market, developed in response to the shortages and bureaucratic constraints on entrepreneurial activity, intensified following a government ban in 1982 on a number of imported items. Faced with declining standards of living and the systematic repression of all opposition by the state, vast sections of the population fled the country; by the mid-1980s negative population growth rates were recorded for Guyana (Thomas 1992). The age-sex composition of the migrants (large numbers of women and persons aged 15–34 years) has had a negative impact on birth rates and population increases. The exodus of highly skilled and professional personnel has also drained the country of valuable human resources (Strachan 1989).

The rapidly deteriorating situation forced a turnaround in official economic policy, following the death of Forbes Burnham in 1985. Under his successor, Desmond Hoyte, the Government set out its agenda for economic recovery. In 1988 it embarked on an Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) under the auspices of the IMF and the World Bank.⁴ Growing domestic and international pressure also led to changes in the political sphere. In 1992 the People's Progressive Party, under the leadership of Cheddi Jagan, came to power in the country's first post-Independence 'free and fair' elections. In 1997 the PPP again won, this time under the leadership of Janet Jagan, widow of the late Cheddi Jagan.

The ERP has continued unabated under the new administration. At the macro-economic level, GDP grew from 1991 onwards, reflecting increased outputs of rice and sugar. Production levels in the timber and mining industries also rose as foreign investors began to turn their attention to Guyana, attracted by the inducements on offer and the lack of a comprehensive and enforceable policy which might constrain them in relation to Amerindian land rights (Colchester 1997). Despite an improvement in its balance of payments position, and notwithstanding some debt forgiveness, some 50 per cent of Guyana's foreign exchange earnings remain committed to the national debt, which stood at \$US1.5 billion in 1997 (Colchester 1997:42).

For a population already hard hit by previous years, the ERP heralded further social and economic dislocation. The implementation of a Social Impact Amelioration Programme (SIMAP) to target the most vulnerable groups in society has done little to ameliorate conditions, or to prevent previously protected social groups—in particular those within the middle ranks of the public sector such as teachers and nurses—from joining the ranks of the poor. Between 1985 and 1991, the cost of living index is estimated to have spiralled a thousandfold while the minimum wage in US dollars was reduced by some 65 per cent (UNICEF 1993). In the final analysis, neither the experience of 'Co-operative Socialism' nor the current policy of economic liberalisation has been beneficial to most Guyanese, whose lives have been characterised by hardship under both programmes.

The gendered implications of a nationalist discourse⁵

What have been the implications for women of both these strategies for development? Compared with the rest of the Caribbean, Guyanese women enjoy a high legal status. In keeping with the rhetoric of Co-operative Socialism (recognising women as equal partners with men in the development process) and also with the issues raised by the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–86), a State Paper on Equality for Women was laid before parliament in 1976 that proposed a number of changes in existing legislation and called for women's full integration into national development. The principle of gender equality was later embodied in Article 29 of the 1980 Constitution (although it

lacked any justiciable status). Guyana was also a signatory to the 1980 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 1981 women's issues were officially afforded their own machinery within government with the establishment of a Women's Affairs Bureau (WAB), its original mandate being to fulfil the aims of CEDAW.

The 1980s was a decade of 'unprecedented legal reforms on women's rights in Guyana' (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994:20). For instance, children born out of wedlock were given the same standing and legal rights as children born in wedlock (1983). The Fiscal Amendment Act (1987) made provision for married women to file income tax returns separately. The Labour Law relating to the employment of women in industrial settings at night, as well as to overtime work for women working in factories, was repealed (1983), while the Minimum Wages Bill created parity in the terms 'skilled' and 'unskilled' to designate male and female workers (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994:20).

Legal changes continued into the 1990s, with the passing of the Equal Rights (Amendment) Act (ERA) in 1990 to give 'teeth' to Article 29 (1) of the 1980 Constitution. Under the ERA, discrimination against women in the hiring and promotion of workers was forbidden, and the principle of equal pay for equal work supported. Public sector workers were entitled to maternity and retirement benefits. The Family and Dependents Act (1990) provided for widows—common-law or legally married—and their children to make application to the courts for maintenance out of the estate of the deceased. The Married Persons (Property) Act (1990) stipulated that property rights must take into account—albeit inequitably—the woman's contribution to the family welfare, and covered couples in consensual unions. In May 1995, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill was passed (becoming law in the first half of 1996), legalising abortions carried out under certain conditions, and in 1996 a Domestic Violence Law was passed. Most recently, the Prevention of Discrimination Act (PDA) (1997) sought to extend the ERA by introducing the notion of equal pay for work of equal value, and recognising, for the first time, sexual harassment.

Constitutional and other advances, however, have maintained a silence around issues of women's sexuality. The reproduction of families, children and future citizens is normalised as a heterosexual project through state and legal discourses.⁶ Neither have constitutional changes been matched by improvements in the quality of women's lives in Guyana. In education, as in other Caribbean territories, women now equal or outnumber their male counterparts at all levels. Yet they continue to be clustered in such fields as teaching, nursing, social work and food management. Not only are they more visible than men in part-time programmes at university and adult education institutions, but many women drop out because their time is not infinitely elastic (UNICEF 1993). Progress in the workplace had, until the PDA, been restricted by the silence of existing legislation on the question of what constitutes sexual discrimination (George 1998). At present, however, women continue to have no legal guarantees against unfair dismissal on the grounds of

pregnancy, and are not *legally* entitled to maternity leave or reinstatement after it. Moreover, although women won the right to suffrage since 1953, men continue to dominate the formal political sphere, constituting some 83 per cent of members of parliament in 1993. Following the 1992 elections, only two women were appointed to ministerial posts (the portfolios of health and women's affairs). There is similar under-representation of women in local government and various governing bodies appointed by the current administration (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994).

Feminist critiques of nationalist discourses have revealed them to be partial and gendered tales which foreclose alternative narratives, and which frequently inscribe women as mothers of the home and nation (Barriteau 1992; Kandiyoti 1991; McClintock 1993; Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997). In Guyana legislative policies sought to extend women's responsibilities throughout society, while failing to fully recognise or make provision for the extensive work that women already carried out in the domestic domain, thus leaving intact the dominant representation of women as naturally and primarily mothers, subordinate partners and guardians of the domestic sphere. In keeping with its socialist ideology, women's right to employment was enshrined within the Constitution, but little was done to make day care available or introduce measures that might call into question the relationship between women and the domestic domain.

The naturalisation of women's reproductive activities continues in the era of SAPs. For instance, when in 1990 the Married Persons Property Act was passed to deal with the division of property, those who had not worked outside of the home were entitled to less than those who were employed (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994). Men's dominance within the household was further bolstered by the lack of legal recognition for rape within marriage, as well as by the absence until recently of legislation specifically targeting domestic violence, estimated to affect well over half of all women in coastal areas (Danns and Shiw Parsad 1988).

The implications of the gendered ideologies of the state for women were made clear in the responses that followed the collapse of the economy in the mid-1970s. The official public mandate to 'feed, clothe and house the nation' now increasingly became the private responsibility of households and, therefore, of women, who were highly visible actors in the two most popular responses that emerged as integral features of the local landscape. The first was the massive informalisation of the economy and the internationalisation of the informal food trading sector. As traders, women defied bans on certain foods and consumer items by importing goods deemed illegal. With families to feed, they continued to purchase items on the black market. In both instances, as income-earners and consumers, they faced considerable personal risk.⁷

Migration overseas represented the other significant response. Women demonstrated the greatest propensity to emigrate. As a good deal of this outward flow remains illegal, families are often reunited only after several

years if ever at all. While emigration is seen mainly as a coastal phenomenon, the movement of Amerindian women and children across the Venezuelan and Brazilian borders also appears to be on the increase (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994; Roopnaraine 1996).

More recently, with the implementation of adjustment programmes, women's responsibilities have become more entrenched. SAPs, with their emphasis on market relations, entail a reconstitution of the boundaries between 'private' and 'public' spaces. While community and household labour remain outside the ambit of macro-economic discourse, in effect the 'private' domain is radically expanded as a consequence of the state's drastic pruning of its role as a provider of social services. Moreover, the inequitable division of labour and resources within the household means that it is women as managers of the domestic domain who pay the highest price and whose efforts continue to be largely unrecognised (Antrobus 1989; Elson 1991).

The implementation of adjustment policies in Guyana led to the intensification of existing strategies as well as to the appearance of new challenges and dilemmas. The continuing inadequacy of the physical infrastructure remained an impediment to the functioning of everyday life. Fetching water, for example, was a normal part of the household's daily routine and while not new to rural and hinterland areas, it was a common feature of urban households as well. Women who worked out of their homes or whose livelihoods depended on a regular electricity supply (some seamstresses for example) planned their lives around unexpected power cuts. Households also witnessed a reduction in their food intake, while the search for cheaper food increased the amount of time spent preparing meals (UNICEF 1993).

Notwithstanding the variety of largely privatised strategies that women have developed in their capacity as household managers, they are not infinitely adaptable to the increased demands placed on them. As expectant mothers, many women suffer from poverty-induced illnesses (Boyd 1989; UNICEF 1993). Maternal malnutrition was listed as the primary cause of infant mortality, the rates for the latter between 1985–1990 being among the highest in the Commonwealth Caribbean (Statistical Yearbook for Latin America and the Caribbean 1993). Again, these national figures hide the fact that maternal malnutrition, morbidity and infant mortality rates are much higher in Amerindian communities. In 1991, for example, low birth weights among Amerindian children (an indication of mother's nutritional status) averaged 46 per cent, while the national average was 24 per cent (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994).

Within households sexual, emotional and physical abuse of women and children remain pervasive. A counselling service, 'Help and Shelter', was established in Georgetown in 1994, two years prior to the passing of a Domestic Violence Act. Although two shelters for battered women and children have recently opened, the only sanctuary that exists for the majority of women remains informal and kinship-based. Domestic violence is a matter that

still remains largely outside the ambit of national concern and is accorded far less seriousness than other crimes against the person. Growing numbers of street children, mainly boys and most evident in urban areas, further attest to the severe strain being placed on families and households.

Highlighting the gendered dimensions of Guyana's experience of recession and adjustment does not mean that any automatic identification among women exists. Feminist issues took a back seat to the struggle for free elections during the crisis years of the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the winner-takes-all nature of politics greatly narrowed the space for mobilisation outside of party denominational and racialised lines. In fact, the only women's group to emerge during this period which deliberately embraced women regardless of their political party identification (although initial contacts were through party members) was Red Thread, which was formed in 1986 as an initiative of women active in the WPA and which is the subject of our final chapter.

In the current period non-governmental organisations are still regarded with some suspicion and the demands on women's time act as a further deterrent to their involvement. Nor has the return to electoral democracy in 1992 witnessed a resolution of the central issue of racialised identities as the overriding criterion for political affiliation and loyalty. On the contrary, the political debate on the causes and consequences of the current situation is highly polarised. Ethnicity emerges as the dominant explanatory factor, the basis for accusation and counter-accusation. Moreover, the discourse of ethnicity is a monopoly of the coast (Roopnaraine 1996), of Afro-Guyanese vs. Indo-Guyanese, one that more often than not tragically overlooks the fact that on *all* counts it is the interior and largely Amerindian communities which have fared worst at the level of everyday life, with some 85 per cent of the Amerindian population reportedly falling below the poverty line in 1994 (Forte 1996; Roopnaraine 1996). In this highly charged environment, it is not just that specificity produces competing claims to resources, but also similarities in social practices may well be accompanied by intensified perceptions of difference. We now turn to a closer examination of the material parameters within which Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women perform the practices of cultural reproduction. In the following section we explore changing patterns of women's employment and associated shifts in family and household structures.

Women and employment

Analyses of changing employment patterns for women since Independence—over the last thirty years—are limited by two types of constraints. The first relates to the paucity of current and reliable statistical information.⁸ The second problem pertains to the question of whether Censuses adequately capture the full gamut of women's activities, given the tendency of official sources to equate productive work with regular employment (Massiah and Gill 1984; Odie-Ali 1986). The limitations of the Census therefore need to be kept in

mind, especially in the present case where informality has come to play an important role in the labour market and unemployment, even by official standards, is on the increase.

As we discussed in Chapter Three, women's labour force participation in Guyana peaked in the first decade of the twentieth century at 44 per cent, but declined steadily thereafter, reaching a low of 19 per cent by 1970. Since this time, however, women have been re-entering the formal labour force in growing numbers and at a faster rate than men, as Table 4.1 illustrates.

Despite their association with the domestic sphere, between 1970 and 1992 the number of women in the labour force rose by over 150 per cent, with a corresponding 25 per cent rise for men. Twenty per cent of the economically active population in 1970, women constituted over one-third by 1992. However, they have been disproportionately affected by unemployment, so that by 1992 women comprised 34 per cent of the total official labour force but accounted for 53 per cent of the unemployed.

Women's experiences of the labour market have not been homogeneous, but rather have varied across location, age and ethnicity. Urban labour force participation rates for women rose from 28 per cent in 1970 to 47 per cent in

Table 4.1 Percentage of men and women over 15 years of age in the labour force, 1970-92*

	1970	1980	1986	1992
<i>Female</i>				
Total population	187,985	228,775	244,568	241,508
Total labour force (no.)	35,732	56,013	81,813	94,890
Unemployment (no.)**	6,795	12,356	19,359	17,176
<i>Male</i>				
Total population	182,117	220,467	232,215	225,665
Total labour force (no.)	146,439	175,534	193,577	183,188
Unemployment (no.)	21,250	26,555	16,215	15,410
Female l.f.p.r. (%)	19.0	24.5	33.5	39.3
Female unemployment (%)	19.0	22.1	23.7	18.1
Male l.f.p.r. (%)	80.4	79.6	83.4	81.2
Male unemployment (%)	14.5	15.1	8.4	8.4
% of total labour force				
Female	19.6	24.1	29.7	34.1
Male	80.4	75.9	70.3	65.9

Sources: 1960, 1970, 1980 Census; Guyredem 1987; HIES 1992; Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994.

Notes:

* The labour force participation rate (l.f.p.r.) refers to the sum of persons working and persons looking for work (the total labour force in table above) as a percentage of the total population over the age of 15 years.

** The unemployment rate refers to those persons looking for work or wanting and available for work as a percentage of the total labour force.

1992; in rural areas the figures were 14 per cent and 36 per cent. Rates of unemployment were higher among rural women, 19 per cent in 1992 compared with 16 per cent for their urban counterparts (IDB 1994, Tables 5 and 6). Generational contrasts were also evident. While the numbers of women entering the workforce rose across all ages, the largest absolute increases between 1970 and 1992 were experienced by women in the 25–29 (351 per cent), 30–34 (444 per cent) and 35–39 (378 per cent) age groups (IDB 1994, Table 1.2.1). These figures suggest that domestic and child-care responsibilities are less of a deterrent to female employment today, and indeed in the current economic context may compel women into the workforce to support their families. That the labour force participation rates for women in the older age groups are also on the rise has possible ramifications for child-care as it is usually older female relatives who provide such services for younger women in the absence of adequate social provision.⁹

Finally, Indo- and Afro-Guyanese women demonstrated some differences, one study in the mid-1980s finding that participation rates were lowest for Indo-Guyanese women (Abdulah and Singh 1984). Figures for 1992 indicate that a considerably smaller number of Indo-Guyanese women (29 per cent) were economically active than Afro-Guyanese women (50 per cent). Unemployment rates for 1992 were also higher among Indo-Guyanese women (21 per cent) than Afro-Guyanese women (18 per cent) (HIES 1992, Table 1.5.1).

These disparities suggest that gendered employment opportunities, ideologies and practices around the division of labour are quite varied. At the same time, we should inject a note of caution about the above figures. Women's work in rural areas, especially when carried out within the context of a family unit, tends to be vastly undercounted (Odie-Ali 1986). Experiences and expectations of employment may also shape women's responses; for example Afro-Guyanese women with a history of labour market involvement may be more inclined to describe their informal endeavours as work or to offer their status as unemployed, whereas Indo-Guyanese women may define the same activities as secondary to their main role as housewife or be less likely to consider themselves unemployed. We have, at the beginning of this section, already touched on the ways in which official data fail to recognise the extent of women's involvement in income-earning activities. Additionally, we are suggesting here that national level figures may mask the different interpretations of employment and unemployment across the axes of distinction we identified above.

The last three decades have witnessed a massive growth and then an equally sharp drop in public sector employment. Development policies in the 1970s heralded a spate of nationalisations, increasing opportunities for Afro-Guyanese women through the creation of clerical and other jobs to service the rapidly expanding state bureaucracy. By 1980 over 80 per cent of the economy had come under government ownership, with the public sector (consisting of Central Government and state enterprises) decisively replacing the private

sector as the country's major employer. The 1980s witnessed a reversal of this trend, initially in response to the recession of the 1970s and then later as part of the structural adjustment package. Between 1980 and 1992 the public sector's share of total employment fell from 51 to 26 per cent (IDB 1994:11). Most of these cutbacks occurred not in state enterprises but rather in the Central Government, a major employer of women. By 1992, Central Government's share-of total public sector employment had decreased to 27 per cent from 43 per cent in 1980 (IDB 1994, Tables 2.2.1).

Declining employment opportunities for Afro-Guyanese women in the public sector were not only the result of government-induced retrenchment policies. They stemmed also from the growing unattractiveness of the public sector as a potential employer. Between 1980 and 1992 real wages fell sharply, and by 1993 the minimum real wage in the public sector had deteriorated to half of its value in 1987. The substantial erosion of wages acted both as a disincentive to remain within the sector as well as a deterrent to prospective job-seekers. In this respect, the increasing trend towards feminisation of this low-paying sector suggests that women may have far fewer choices over the sale of their labour power. Women constituted 41 per cent of the public sector labour force by 1992 compared with 26 per cent in 1980 (IDB 1994, Table 2.1.1).

In a discussion of the impact of global economic restructuring and SAPs on changing employment patterns in Latin America and the Caribbean, Sharon McClenaghan argues that for the majority of women, their entry into the workforce is not due to large-scale formal employment in the export-oriented sector, but rather results from 'the creation of an economic environment which necessitates the acceptance of low-wage, low-skilled, and insecure employment' (McClenaghan 1997:20).¹⁰ This is particularly relevant to Guyana, where many of those who were marginalised from the public sector and growing numbers of new entrants to the labour force—both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese—entered the informal sector as a result of the worsening economic situation. The figures on self-employment shown in Table 4.2 are an indicator of the increasingly important role informality has come to play in the lives of Guyanese workers over the last fifteen or so years. Again, it is important to remember that these figures are likely to greatly underestimate the actual size of the informal sector.

As in the formal sector, the increase appears to have been far more dramatic for women than for men, suggesting differential employment opportunities as well as domestic responsibilities. In 1992, not surprisingly, levels of self-employment for women were higher in rural (51 per cent) than urban (32 per cent) areas (IDB 1994, Tables 5 and 6), reflecting the fact that the bulk of formal employment in the service and light manufacturing sectors continues to be located in urban centres, and particularly in Georgetown. Older women were also more likely to be own-account or casual labourers, with the proportion of women in regular salaried employment peaking at 67 per cent for the 20–24 age group and declining steadily thereafter (HIES 1992; see IDB 1994, Table 4).

Women's increasing involvement in informal work does not translate into

Table 4.2 Self-employment, 1980–92

Year	1980		1992	
	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Female</i>				
Self-employed	5,623	12.9	33,834	43.5
Total employed	43,657	—	77,714	—
<i>Male</i>				
Self-employed	28,524	19.1	63,251	37.7
Total employed	148,979	—	167,778	—
<i>Both</i>				
Self-employed	34,147	17.8	97,085	39.5
Total employed	192,636	—	245,492	—

Sources: 1980 Population Census, Vol. 2, Table 2.3; HIES 1992, Table 1.7.2

improved working conditions or parity with men. They are confined to a far narrower range of jobs that are less highly valued and rewarded. Prostitution is perhaps most emblematic of women's vulnerability in the informal sector, sex workers (predominantly younger women) having no protection (prostitution is criminalised under local laws, 1946, Cap 8:02) or institutional support (Trotz and Peake 1998).

Moreover, the scale of most women's informal activities is frequently restricted by domestic responsibilities and relatively lower access to capital (Holder 1988). Fewer women than men apply for loans, and the bias in procurement has tended to favour joint applications or men applying alone (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994). In a regional survey of loans secured by women relative to men, Guyana was found to have the greatest gender disparity after Barbados; in 1993, only 9 per cent of the public loans approved were for applications by women (Mondesire and Dunn 1995).

As we saw earlier, adjustment policies have stimulated some sectors of the economy, producing increases in employment in agriculture, construction, commerce, transport and finance, with declines occurring in the public utilities, manufacturing and government (Thomas 1997). However, the effects were not uniform across gender. Overall, men remain dominant in agriculture, construction, electricity, mining, transport and communications, with women more visible in the commercial and service sectors.

The largest average increase in female employment between 1980 and 1992 occurred in commerce (21 per cent for women compared to 11 per cent for men), a sector (including hotels, retail and wholesale stores) dominated by women although the change is also witness to the growth of small-scale activities in the informal sector. Female employment also expanded in fields not dominated by women, such as an 11 per cent increase in financial services (cf. 16 per cent for men) (IDB 1994, Table 2.1.1). Not only has the boost in the

rice and sugar industries given a stimulus to the female labour force, but more women are also entering into cash crop production for the domestic market. These relative shifts have meant that women have increased their representation in the total labour force in almost every sector, although this is not necessarily the result of expansion. For example, while employment in manufacturing declined between 1980 and 1992, this was caused by men exiting in significant numbers so that the proportion of women increased overall.

Occupational groupings indicate the concentration of women in certain types of activities. The relatively high representation of women in technical and administrative jobs in Table 4.3 is offset by the fact that women continue to be channelled into a narrow range of female-dominated occupations. Moreover, women are clearly not as visible as men in managerial, production-related and agricultural jobs. While there is also socio-economic differentiation between women, the downward mobility experienced by previously protected categories of the workforce over the last twenty years has eroded many of these distinctions, even if the symbolic status associated with some occupations remains. It is now common for women in the middle ranks (such as nurses and teachers) to take on extra work to supplement their incomes (Holder 1988). As elementary workers (Table 4.3), women are mainly domestic service workers or petty vendors and traders.

Ethnicity, as a major axis of differentiation between women in the labour market, is illustrated by the occupational distribution of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women (Table 4.4).

Table 4.3 Occupational distribution of women, 1992

<i>Occupational group</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>% of female labour force*</i>	<i>women as % of total labour force</i>
Legislators, senior officials and managers	1,680	2.2	28.3
Professionals	5,379	6.9	52.7
Technicians and associate professionals	6,275	8.1	59.9
Clerical	8,696	11.2	64.9
Service workers and shop sales workers	8,916	11.5	37.5
Agriculture, forestry, fishery and related	9,265	11.9	25.1
Craft and related	5,989	7.7	16.5
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	1,378	1.8	8.0
Elementary**	26,628	34.3	32.1
Defence force	133	0.1	39.8
Not stated/other	3,375	4.3	—
Total	77,714	100.0	—

Source: Adapted from HIES 1992, Table 1.8.2.

Notes:

* Owing to rounding up to one significant figure, percentage totals may not equal 100.

** Includes street and stall vendors, domestic workers.

Table 4.4 Occupational distribution of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women, 1992

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Indo-Guyanese women</i>		<i>Afro-Guyanese women</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%*</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Legislators, senior officials and managers	589	2.1	788	2.2
Professionals	1,370	4.9	3,201	9.0
Technicians and associate professionals	1,523	5.5	3,525	9.9
Clerks	2,644	9.5	4,848	13.6
Service and shop sales-workers	2,117	7.6	5,504	15.5
Agriculture, forestry and fishery workers	2,896	10.4	1,479	4.2
Craft and related workers	2,434	8.8	2,758	7.7
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	544	2.0	759	2.1
Elementary occupations	12,084	43.5	11,251	31.6
Defence force	—	—	133	0.4
Not stated	1,558	5.6	1,378	3.9
Total	27,759	100.0	35,624	100.0

Source: Adapted from HIES 1992, Table 1.8.1

Note: * Owing to rounding up to one significant figure, percentage totals may not equal 100

That the bulk of women are located in elementary occupations underscores the limited opportunities and importance of the informal sector for both groups. In both cases as well, an equally small number of women are located in the most senior echelons of the labour market as legislators or senior officials. However, proportionally more Indo-Guyanese women were agricultural workers, with a larger percentage of Afro-Guyanese women in professional, technical, clerical and service occupations. Differences were also exhibited across sectors, with Indo-Guyanese women located in agriculture, wholesale/retail trade, manufacturing and domestic service. Afro-Guyanese women, on the other hand, were proportionally more visible in government—public administration, education, health and other community services.

At one level, these imbalances in the labour force reflect patterns of residential settlement and occupational specialisation which, as was discussed in Chapter Three, date back to the post-emancipation and post-indentureship periods. The reproduction of these asymmetries today is the result of more contemporary mechanisms of incorporation and displacement. The dominance of Afro-Guyanese within the public sector relates to the development of patronage networks along racialised lines, facilitated by extensive state control of the economy. The net effect (whether through exclusion of applicants or refusal of the terms of employment) has been the predominance of Indo-Guyanese within the ranks of the private sector and self-employed. Occupational specialisation has in turn given rise to racialised stereotypes. The effects of this can be seen both at the level of ideology (some

people are naturally suited for certain jobs') as well as practice (dissuading prospective employees in both the public and private sectors).

These differences suggest that the impact of the crisis and adjustment years has been relatively uneven. The access of urban Afro-Guyanese women to government jobs meant that they were better placed relative to women working in the private sector in such matters as job security and maternity benefits. They were also among the first to be affected by the erosion of real wages and redundancies that characterised the latter part of the 1970s, and later the systematic streamlining which followed the implementation of the adjustment package (Thomas 1997).¹¹ However, the change of government in 1992 has not acted as an incentive to Indo-Guyanese women to seek public sector employment. Rather, in the face of ongoing economic immiseration, few women now consider such jobs preferable to private and informal sector opportunities. Low wages, job insecurity and inadequate, if any, benefits are the conditions presently facing the majority of the female workforce in Guyana.

Finally, while the focus here has been on Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women it is critical to recognise that Amerindian women constitute a distinctly disadvantaged group (Forte 1996a and b). The distribution of resources is heavily weighted to the coast, with the result that post-primary education and employment opportunities in the hinterland regions are virtually non-existent. The mining and logging companies which operate in the interior draw on a male workforce, a large proportion of whom are recruited from coastal communities (Roopnaraine 1996). Comparatively, Amerindian women have the lowest educational attainment and rates of employment. Among those women who do earn an income, almost all are concentrated in the agricultural sector (72 per cent) and as self-employed workers (78 per cent) (HIES 1992). Nor do Amerindian women appear to fare much better in the cities, domestic service being a common employment and one study finding, for example, that they were heavily over-represented among a sample of sex workers in the capital (PAHO 1993).

Marriage, fertility and households

Women's changing experience of employment has been accompanied by shifts in family and household structure across ethnicity. As we showed in the previous chapter, Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese family and household patterns are seen as quite distinct, and inter-ethnic relationships, although far more common today, still encounter prejudices. Marriage and motherhood are considered critical, even inseparable, elements of Indo-Guyanese women's experience and identity. Whereas motherhood is similarly considered to be the hallmark of adult feminine status for Afro-Guyanese women, it is not necessarily linked to marriage or even consensual (common-law) relationships. The visiting union (a male-female relationship which does not

require co-residence) is an acceptable form, but one which is severely censured for Indo-Guyanese women.

These variations are evident from recent statistics for Guyana which show for example that in 1992 just 23 per cent of Afro-Guyanese women over fifteen years of age were living in a marital union, compared with 41 per cent of their Indo-Guyanese counterparts. Taking both marriage and common-law partnerships into account, 40 per cent of Afro-Guyanese women resided in a household with a male partner, as against 58 per cent of the Indo-Guyanese women (IDB 1994, Table 1.1.1).

If we look at the indicators over a twenty-year period, however, it is clear that patterns of marriage and household structure are shifting (Table 4.5). The figures suggest a rise in female household headship, which could arise through widowhood, male migration or desertion, or female initiative. Additionally, fewer women are now in a marital relationship while an increasing number live with men in common-law partnerships.

The rise in female household headship and drop in marriage in Guyana is not simply the result of an intensification of patterns previously identified with Afro-Guyanese women. For instance, according to statistics from the World Fertility Survey of 1975, 56 per cent of Indo-Guyanese women were in a marital relationship, with 5 per cent in common-law unions. By 1992 the percentage of Indo-Guyanese women in the first group dropped to 41 per cent, while common-law unions rose to 17 per cent. The percentage of Indo-Guyanese women who were widowed, divorced or separated increased from 6 per cent in 1975 to 26 per cent by 1992 (Balkaran 1983; HIES 1992). These figures suggest that marital disruption is more common, and that Indo-Guyanese women are increasingly remaining single or entering non-marital relationships. Preliminary research also notes that some women are opting to defer marriage as it increases their chances of successful emigration, either through sponsorship as a dependant by an immediate relative, or by eventually securing marriage to a partner with residency or citizenship elsewhere (Danns and Shiw Parsad 1988). Finally, fertility rates have been decreasing over the years, and it appears to be the lack of opportunities, rather than their existence, which has reinforced this trend. In this respect limiting numbers of children is a response to the higher cost of living and the growing imperative for women to seek work. This is especially relevant to the

Table 4.5 Headship, marriage, common-law and fertility rates for women, 1980–92

	<i>Female-heads (%)</i>	<i>Married (%)</i>	<i>Common-law (%)</i>	<i>Fertility</i>
1980	24.4	48.1	9.1	3.2
1985	28.3	39.2	11.8	2.2
1992	29.5	33.7	16.9	2.6

Sources: Adapted from 1980 Census; Guyredem 1987; HIES 1992; Mondesire and Dunn 1995

Caribbean where child labour remains an anomaly and a high, albeit diminishing value continues to be placed on education.

Household and employment characteristics of women in the surveys

The remainder of this chapter narrows its focus from the broader picture outlined above, and sets out the main household and employment patterns relating to the women in the three communities surveyed. These three places—an urban neighbourhood in the capital city, a rural coastal village and an interior mining town—are where Guyanese-ness will be explored. We have chosen an emphasis on places that have a resonance in terms of racialised diversity (Albouystown) as well as of the historical geography of Guyana, i.e. places connected with the two major economic activities of sugar (Meten Meer Zorg East) and bauxite (Linden). Albouystown is well known as one of the poorest communities in Georgetown. Meten Meer Zorg East is a typical West Coast Demerara village with its origins in the plantation system. Linden, originally a small Amerindian settlement, is now the major site in the country for the extraction of bauxite. We also chose these places because of their connections with Red Thread. Red Thread had already conducted work in these places and had supportive contacts in Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East. Through these three case studies we hope to problematise the discursive strategy of referring to Third World villages and towns as ‘natural’ categories, by exploring how Albouystown, Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden are constructed through the quotidian dialectic of the production of social life and gendered and racialised identities.

A note on definitions

‘Household’ and ‘employment’ are terms whose meanings must be carefully specified. In the Guyanese context, categories such as ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’ employment make little sense today in what is largely an unregulated economic arena. Nor were the words ‘work’ or ‘job’ employed in a systematic manner by the women participants. Women engaged in the same occupation (and especially if operating from their homes) sometimes identified themselves as not working but merely ‘catchin’ their hand’ or doing ‘something on the side’, while others would claim they had a job. Consequently, we do not distinguish between full-time and part-time work. Employment refers to all activities through which income may be earned, regardless of how small or irregular it may be or where such activities are carried out (see Senior 1991).

The criteria used to identify a household were restricted to those who lived together and either contributed to the household’s upkeep or were seen as the responsibility of other members. In all cases the dominant route to membership was through the family, underscoring the importance of ethnic

kinship ties. Thus we adopt a definition of the household that focuses on economic, social and cultural kinship-mediated flows.

The household has two related constitutive features: structure and headship. The multiplicity of household forms in the Caribbean have given rise to perhaps as many explanations as there are types. Most of the early analyses were locked into a restrictive framework that took the nuclear family as its reference point. These biases were evident in the descriptive terminology employed, with female-headed households variously labelled as disintegrated, denuded and incomplete (see Clarke 1957; Henriques 1953; Simey 1946). For our purposes, it is thus imperative to reject the *a priori* primacy of the nuclear model; it is so ideologically loaded that it automatically becomes a yardstick.

The bias towards a male breadwinner model—automatically equated with male presence—also affects definitions of household headship (Youssef and Hetler 1983). These positions have since been challenged but the difficulty of arriving at an accurate portrayal is widely acknowledged, since the socially prescribed role of the man may lead to an exaggeration of male headship both by the respondent and the interviewer, even where the woman is in reality the dominant figure in the home (Massiah 1982; Powell 1986; Senior 1991:97–8). Thus a female-headed household will denote the absence of a resident male partner (Bolles 1981; Chant 1991). The term ‘male-headed’ will, however, be avoided; instead we indicate whether a woman is in a co-residential unit or not. Accordingly, we will distinguish between female-headed households, co-residential households (women who live with men) and extended households. Extended households comprise persons in addition to the respondent, her partner and children.

This is not to say that there are no normative forces at work in structuring households, or to deny that there is a system—or systems—of social meaning underlying household structure and functionality in the Caribbean. Nor are we suggesting that, purged of ethnocentric interpretations, diversity in the Caribbean context becomes just that and nothing more: random variation for its own sake. Finally, it should also be acknowledged that classifications impose a level of stasis which bears little reality to the dynamics of domestic organisation; as we emphasised in our introduction, what interests us are the connections through which ideas and practices around the domestic are produced. But synchronic limitations notwithstanding, a typology gives an indication of some of the dominant and different trends that we will be taking up in detail in the remainder of this book.

***Household and employment characteristics in Albouystown,
Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden***

The survey populations comprised 184 women from Albouystown (95 Afro-Guyanese and 89 Indo-Guyanese); 100 Afro-Guyanese women from Linden; 100 Indo-Guyanese women from Meten Meer Zorg East; and 50 men from

Linden. The average age of the women interviewed in Albouystown was 39 years (ranging from 17 to 76 years), and 34 years in Linden (with a range of 16 to 70 years) as well as Meten Meer Zorg East (ranging from 16 to 77 years). Household size did not vary widely among the three communities, with an average of 5.2 persons in Albouystown, 6.4 in Linden and 5.2 in Meten Meer Zorg East.

In general women were more likely to live with a man than to head their own households, but there were variations based on both place and ethnicity. There were more female-headed households in Albouystown (39 per cent) than in Linden (35 per cent) or Meten Meer Zorg East (20 per cent). In Albouystown, Afro-Guyanese respondents exhibited a greater tendency to head households (54 per cent) than Indo-Guyanese (24 per cent).

In Meten Meer Zorg East and Albouystown, female heads were older on average than women who lived with men. Most Indo-Guyanese female heads were widowed, divorced or separated from husbands, indicating that Indo-Guyanese women experience headship for different reasons than their Afro-Guyanese counterparts, a far larger number of whom had never been married. Interestingly in Linden female heads tended to be younger (age 32) than women who lived with men (age 35), possibly indicating the effects of retrenchment and subsequent migration of some men from the area in search of work.

Extended households were common in all three places and primarily included family members. They were far more likely among female-headed households, with the exception of Meten Meer Zorg East where household extension was just as likely among co-residential units. In Linden 75 per cent of female-headed households were extended, as opposed to 44 per cent of households in which a male partner was present (figures for Albouystown were 64 per cent and 29 per cent respectively). Female-headed extended households also tended to attract/incorporate adult women to a greater extent than co-residential households.

Distinctions also occurred in relation to the marital status of the respondents. The majority of Indo-Guyanese women were or had been married—81 per cent in Meten Meer Zorg East and 74 per cent of the Indo-Guyanese women in Albouystown—contrasting sharply with both Linden (36 per cent) as well as Afro-Guyanese women from Albouystown (47 per cent).¹² Similarly, most Indo-Guyanese women who were currently in a residential relationship with a man were married, irrespective of place, although the numbers of women in consensual/common-law relationships was higher among women from Albouystown. In contrast, more Afro-Guyanese women were in common-law relationships than were married to the men they lived with. Finally, Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown were far more likely to report non-residential (visiting) relationships with men (20 per cent) than were women in Linden (5 per cent) or Indo-Guyanese women in Albouystown (3 per cent) or Meten Meer Zorg East (none).¹³

Table 4.6 Employment status of women in Albouystown, Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East

<i>Employment</i>	<i>Albouystown</i>		<i>Linden</i>		<i>MMZ East</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Employed	94	51.0	56	56	55	55
Looking for work	22	11.9	33	33	2	2
Home duties	68	36.9	11	11	43	43
Total	184	100.0	100	100.0	100	100.0

Source: Respondents Surveys, 1993

The effects of economic crisis could clearly be seen in relation to the high levels of female labour force participation among the women (see Table 4.6). The data on employment collected from the surveys reflect the intersections of ethnicity, class and gender within labour markets.

These comparatively high numbers reflect the centrality of employment in women's lives. The high proportion of women looking for work in Linden is a reflection of the large number of retrenchments from Linmine, the bauxite industry and major employer. Occupational multiplicity was not very high, with most women indicating that they would not be able to find the time to take on a second job. Those who did periodically sold goods informally, to neighbours or workmates.

In all three communities, the local informal sector was where the highest numbers of women were located.¹⁴ Forty-seven per cent of the women in Albouystown were self-employed, 38 per cent in Meten Meer Zorg East and 63 per cent in Linden. Engagement in the informal sector was most common through seamstressing and selling items such as milk, eggs, provisions, ice, goods or sweetmeats. In Linden and Albouystown women took in laundry for others, while in Meten Meer Zorg East a few women periodically cleaned shrimp. Two women from Albouystown were traders who travelled occasionally to Suriname and Barbados to purchase goods for sale domestically. The predominance of informality in women's lives is the result of the restrictions imposed by domestic responsibilities, a lack of alternative employment opportunities (particularly in Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East), and the expectations of higher incomes within the informal sector when set against formal sector jobs for low-income women (especially in Albouystown). Informal work was also frequently the only work available to older women.

While informality is generally characterised by its irregularity, it was most sporadic and circumscribed in Meten Meer Zorg East, with many women noting that they could engage in such activities only once or twice a week. Thus although the percentage of women working in Meten Meer Zorg East is roughly the same as that for Albouystown, it disguises the much less regular frequency of engagement in economic activities as well as far smaller choice of occupations. Accordingly,

sums of monies earned were far less than in either of the other two areas. In Linden women did not enjoy as wide a market for their products as in Georgetown, but the prohibitive cost of travelling to the city and the difficulty, for some, of acquiring child-care arrangements, restricted them to their immediate environs. In Albouystown, mobility was least limited, with some women working in the centre of town in the markets and in front of proprietor's shops (where they frequently sell the same goods as the stores but for slightly lower prices).

Domestic service also featured quite highly for women from Meten Meer Zorg East and Albouystown; the women within this sector were also more likely to be Indo-Guyanese and older. Wages here were extremely low and conditions dependent on individual employers. Not surprisingly then, many women preferred to work on their own or, as domestics, changed jobs many times before finding a reasonably suitable place of employment.

Jobs outside of the informal sector and domestic service varied from place to place. They were most limited in Meten Meer Zorg East, where only five occupations were recorded in the public and private sectors (weeding on the sugar estate, embroidery with a women's collective, shrimp-grading in a factory, school cleaning and child-minding). In Linden retrenchment from the bauxite industry has curtailed options, but a few women have been able to find some formal sector employment as security guards, secretaries, nurses, clerks, hospital workers or police constables. There was most variation in Albouystown, with some women additionally working as factory machinists, restaurant cooks, waitresses and hairdressing assistants. Opportunities varied from place to place. In general Afro-Guyanese women predominated in public sector employment, although it involved relatively low numbers of all women (13 per cent in Albouystown, and 16 per cent in both of the other areas) on account of the low wages earned there.¹⁵

Differences of place, age and ethnicity notwithstanding, the survey data suggest that job opportunities are quite limited for low-income women with few formal and technical qualifications to offer. Gender differentiation in employment patterns was borne out by data collected on women's partners, most of whom were employed at the time of the survey (93 per cent in Albouystown, 89 per cent in Meten Meer Zorg East and 88 per cent in Linden). Men were primarily in production-related jobs, and earned more than women. Within the informal sector, men's activities also demonstrated more regularity, greater mobility, ability to attract a larger clientele and a specialisation in skilled trades which were more highly remunerated than the activities in which women engaged.

In Meten Meer Zorg East almost three-quarters of the employed men worked on the sugar estate. The remainder worked in agriculture or fishing, carpentry, vending, security, or as minibus drivers. Only two of the men worked outside of the region, one in the interior in the gold- and diamond-prospecting industry. In Linden as well the (continuing) dominance of one industry was reflected in the numbers of employed men working in bauxite (50 per cent). Occupations outside of this industry were more varied and there

was a tendency for men to work away from Linden (a trader, a welder, a surveyor, a wood tester, two seamen and four workers at Omai, a multinational mining company). Many of the jobs were similar to those in found in Albouystown: market vendors, road workers, a baker, plumber, photographer, money exchanger, chauffeur, security guard, minibus conductor, mason, upholsterer, welder, carpenter and farmer). In Albouystown other jobs for men included the police force and armed services, the security guard industry, traders, shoemakers, welders, tinsmiths and small shopkeepers.

The discussion above shows that while households and employment do differ from place to place there is sufficient similarity to recognise patterns. While they are certainly indicative of trends (and it is in this vein that we utilise them), the three case-studies that follow move behind the broader picture outlined in this chapter to explore more fully how ideas and practices around ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality are constructed in specific places, and against a wider backdrop in which the increased visibility of women in the Guyanese workforce is less a reflection of a growing demand for female labour than an indicator of households in crisis.

Notes

- 1 We cannot possibly go into any detail regarding the complex history and cross-cutting allegiances that characterised this period (and even here while class and ethnicity have been extensively debated, the place of gender in the anti-colonial struggle in Guyana has yet to be seriously addressed). For detailed studies see Hintzen 1989; Jagan 1966; Premdas 1995; Spinner 1984.
- 2 The PNC's hold on the political process was advanced in a number of ways, including the doctrine of party paramountcy in 1974, which incorporated the party into the state structure, and a rigged referendum that paved the way for the installation of a new constitution in 1980 which conferred wide executive powers on the President (Hintzen 1989; Thomas 1984).
- 3 The government's initial response of instituting a policy of deficit financing led to growing indebtedness to local and foreign creditors, and resulted in massive public sector lay-offs at the end of the 1970s in anticipation of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). A series of further agreements were negotiated, suspended and finally abandoned in 1983. In 1985, the IMF declared Guyana ineligible for further assistance (Baber and Jeffrey 1986).
- 4 This included divestment of state-owned enterprises, restructuring of central government agencies, devaluation, removal of price controls and import restrictions, imposition of wage ceilings and the opening up of the economy to foreign investment. Joint management contracts were also sought in an effort to revitalise the bauxite and sugar industries (Colchester 1997).
- 5 While much of what we say here applies to women in Guyana generally, given our remit in this book our specific focus for the remainder of this chapter is on Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women. We do not wish to imply that other groups of women (such as Amerindian, Chinese, Portuguese) are unimportant to an examination of the construction of racialised identities in Guyana, but lack of space and both primary and secondary data prevent their inclusion in this study.
- 6 In Guyana it is male homosexuality that is explicitly criminalised under the criminal law (Offences Against Morality) Act, Ch. 8:01, Title 25. This is not the case

- throughout the Caribbean; for example, lesbian sex was criminalised in Trinidad and Tobago under the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act, passed in 1991 (Alexander 1997).
- 7 Given that many of the goods involved had been banned by the Government, individuals were subject to harassment at borders, in markets and on sidewalks, and homes suspected of smuggling were also subject to raids.
 - 8 The difficulty of getting adequate baseline data is widely acknowledged by academics and institutions alike (Strachan 1989; UNICEF 1993). The 1980 Census, along with a 1986 Retrospective Demographic Survey (GUYREDEM), a 1992 Household and Income Expenditure Survey (HIES), a discussion of *Changes in the Situation of Women in Guyana 1980–1993* (Andaiye and Shiw Parsad 1994) and a study of *The Situation of African-Guyanese in the Economy* (Thomas 1997), are the sources of most recent information. The 1991 Census was published in early 1998 but few copies are available in the country. Much of this data base—particularly the statistics relating to labour force participation rates—is inaccurate, a problem acknowledged by the Census Bureau itself. The problem has been both political (the climate of secrecy in which information to the general public was kept at a minimum) and economic (the breakdown of infrastructural resources). Consequently, we have made little reference to the Census, preferring instead to rely on the 1992 HIES.
 - 9 Between 1970 and 1992, labour force participation rates rose for older women aged 40–44 (21.9 to 50.4 per cent), 45–49 (22.2 to 43.9 per cent), 50–54 (20.4 to 38.7 per cent), 55–59 (18.0 to 39.2 per cent), 60–64 (12.1 to 24.0 per cent) and 64 plus (5.1 to 12.2 per cent) (IDB 1994, Table 1.2.1).
 - 10 Although McClenaghan mistakenly lumps together the Caribbean, along with Mexico and smaller countries in Central America, as areas where there has been the provision of large-scale employment through export processing zones. In fact this has not been the case for most of the Caribbean countries, with the exception of Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and more recently Barbados.
 - 11 Male workers in the sugar and bauxite industries were also differentially affected. The restructuring of the sugar industry led to an increase in wages and employment for Indo-Guyanese sugar workers, in contrast to the situation in the bauxite industry, where around half of the workforce was retrenched. See Chapters Six and Seven.
 - 12 Many of the Indo-Guyanese women were married legally according to customary Hindu (*sindoor*) and Muslim (*nikha*) religious rites. Some women were customarily, but not legally married. Since we encountered little social distinction between the two among the Indo-Guyanese women interviewed, they are both counted as marriage here.
 - 13 The figures for visiting relationships among Indo-Guyanese women, and particularly among Afro-Guyanese women in Linden, are likely to be higher. Indo-Guyanese women in general were very reluctant to discuss non-residential relationships, while the members of the Research Team did not always fully probe for visiting relationships in Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden, as they were not fully comfortable asking women—many of whom they knew—about men who might not be living with them in a more socially sanctioned and recognised relationship.
 - 14 The informal sector has been variously defined in terms of the size of the workforce, job security, level of technical complexity and employment categories (Benería and Roldán 1987; Scott 1994). For our purposes the latter definition is used in this section and therefore denotes self-employed/own-account workers.
 - 15 In Albouystown for example, domestic service workers earned or expected to earn the least, followed by women in the public sector and then women in the private sector. Own-account workers recorded the highest average earnings, with expectations far exceeding the other sectors.

GENDER, ETHNICITY AND THE FAMILY IN ALBOUYSTOWN

Introduction

The relative paucity of a *comparative* perspective on households and kinship practices in the Caribbean has frequently tended to preclude considerations of how racialised identities are partly 'defined in contrastive relation to each other, not in terms of primordial identity' (R.T.Smith 1996:5; but see Miller 1994; R.T.Smith 1988; Yelvington 1995a). In this chapter we commence our investigation into the dialectics of identity, difference and place against the backdrop of socio-economic change, by examining how the practices of daily living are experienced and represented among a group of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women in Albouystown, a low-income urban community in the capital city Georgetown. Taking R.T.Smith's endorsement of a critical comparative analysis as our point of departure, we look at how women negotiate change in ways that involve the carving out of spaces in relation to each other as well as to (their) men.

Engendering difference

We take our cue both from feminist critiques of the unitary household, as well as more recent injunctions to trace the ways in which specific modalities of power not only generate gender-based inequalities within households, but also differentiate women from each other Across domestic spaces (Barrow 1988; Kandiyoti 1988; Wolf 1992). At the same time, we recognise that focusing on difference may have its own limits. While it can demonstrate the disutility of generalising the category of 'woman', difference, like sameness, runs the danger of itself becoming 'fossilised' (Behar 1993:301). The challenge is to move beyond an approach that fails to consider differences among women, while avoiding the pitfalls of lapsing into an atheoretical pluralism. Rather than take differences for granted, we must ask how they are produced, sustained and transformed in specific contexts and in relation to each other.

In a discussion of familial relations among Afro-Guyanese women and men in a rural Guyanese community in the 1970s, Brackette Williams suggests that women, as keepers of the home, are required to balance the need to live well

with others with the imperative to move the family ahead of others (that is, achieve social mobility). Masculinity, on the other hand, is inextricably tied to the production of racialised identities. Consequently, 'the field of analysis for masculine gender identity is also the field of racio-ethnic competition' (Williams, 1996c: 154).¹ This chapter seeks to extend William's analysis by considering how women talk about practices of domesticity in an urban setting in the 1990s, both in relation to men as well as to each other.

Certainly, feminist discussions of gender and ethnicity have illustrated how women may become signifiers of difference, as biological reproducers of future generations and as transmitters of cultural norms via their role in the household as caretakers of children. This is ultimately a masculinist discourse, but one that may, for different reasons, involve women's active participation (Crain 1996; Gill 1993; Kandiyoti 1993; C. Smith 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997). The latter point in particular alerts us to the fact that other forms of subordination (such as racism), and the co-operation required or generated as an oppositional practice or counter-discourse (such as racialised solidarities framed within the language of kinship), may take precedence over or prevent the development of a shared gender consciousness among women (MacEwen Scott 1994).

Moreover, as we shall see in Albouystown, this is a conversation which goes far beyond the household boundaries it implies. Williams accurately notes the symbolic significance of work for 'racio-ethnic' constructions of masculinity (Williams 1996c: 144). However, as we saw in Chapters Three and Four, Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women are also historically and differentially positioned in relation to employment in ways that are no less critical for contemporary constructions of racialised femininities. Thus their discussions about domesticity and difference also involve, and are generated through, their experiences in the labour market.

Based on these observations, this chapter takes up the following questions: what notions of masculinity and femininity inform male-female relationships? How are ideas of domesticity and employment articulated for/by Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women and what, if any, are the points of difference? To what extent are contemporary daily practices leading to an erosion of differences understood and represented as 'ethnic'? We begin with a discussion of daily life in Albouystown and the place the community occupies in the national imagination.

Making life in Albouystown

Albouystown is situated in the southern section of Georgetown (see Map 5.1). Social divisions are reflected in the city's spatial organisation. Upper-income households historically resided in North Georgetown and primarily continue to do so; an expanding population over the years has now made certain areas of it home to middle- and lower-income groups as well. South Georgetown, on the other hand, has always been occupied mainly by the lower-income population (Strachan 1989).

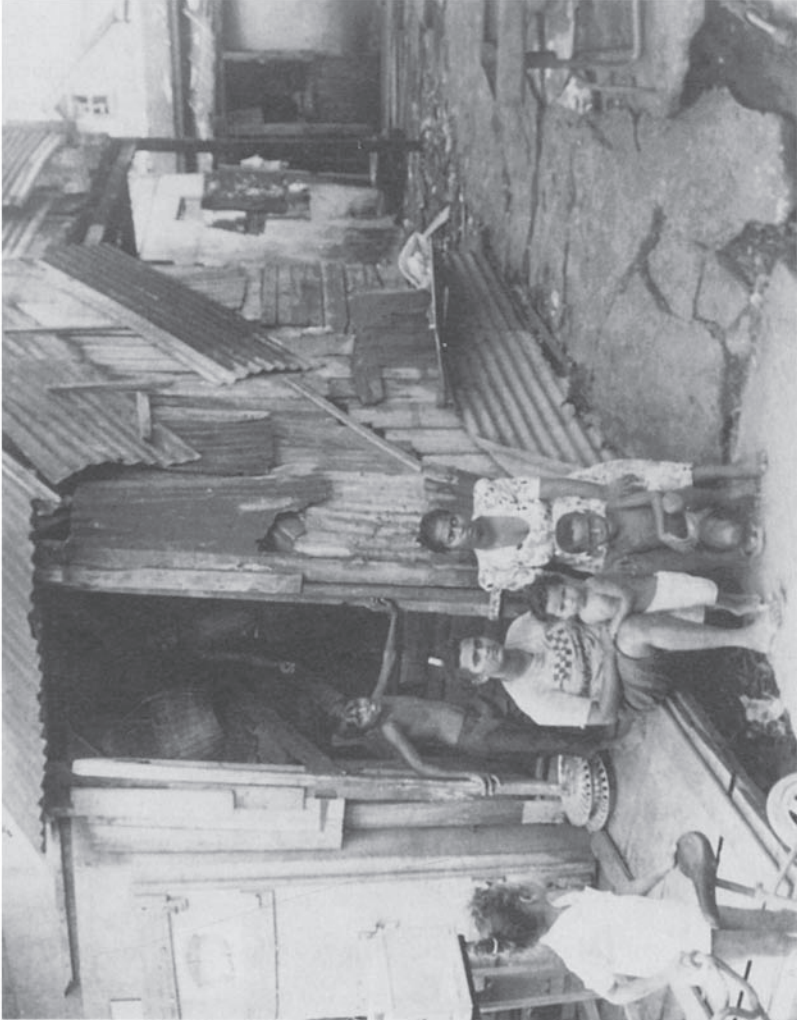
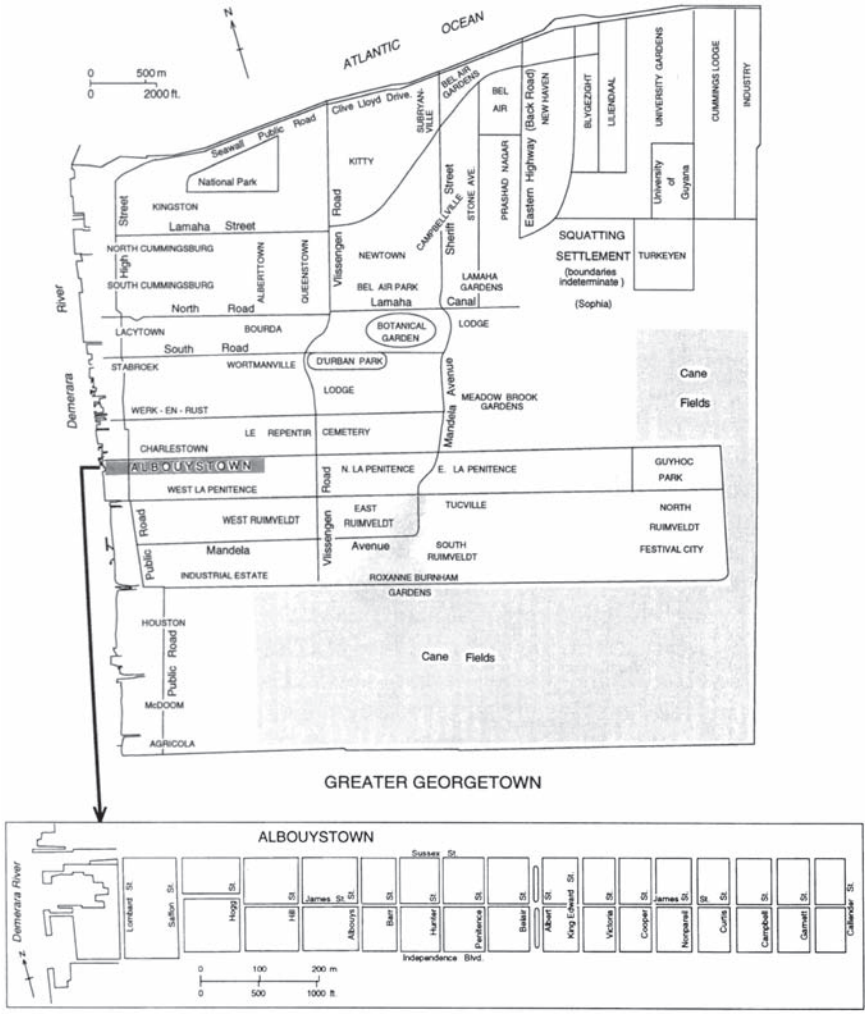


Figure 5.1 Women and children in Alboystown



Map 5.1 Greater Georgetown and Albouystown

Albouystown was formerly the front section of a vast coffee and sugar estate, its name a reminder of its colonial past.² Around 1839 the area was laid out and transformed into a housing settlement through the sale of lots to the working classes—freed Afro-Guyanese and later Indo-Guyanese in the post-slavery and post-indentureship eras. The first mention of Albouystown in the Census Records in 1871 estimated the population at 387 persons. Formally incorporated into the City of Georgetown in 1913, it rapidly expanded as a settlement area for the working poor and migrants from outlying areas so that by 1931, a population of 6,365 was recorded, over 50 per cent of whom (3,440) were women. Sharply increasing demand for cheap accommodation led to unauthorised subdivision of plots and the erection of multiple-unit structures resembling the logic-type buildings (a building divided into several one-room flats) of the slave plantations (Dick 1991). Notwithstanding housing development schemes in the 1950s, tenement yards, multiple occupancy and range houses remain a common feature of the contemporary urban landscape. With a population of around 8,000 persons in 1980, Albouystown is reportedly one of the most densely populated parts of the city (Central Housing and Planning Authority, Vol. 3, 1982). Preliminary figures from the 1991 Census estimate a decline in the population to a little over 6,000 persons. Among the women interviewed, only 10 per cent had migrated to Albouystown from other areas less than five years ago, suggesting that Albouystown is no longer the destination point of persons coming from outside of the city.³

Situated close to commercial and industrial activities, Albouystown is home to a health centre, a community space, a nursery school, a recently refurbished cinema and established and informal churches and temples. A mosque in a neighbouring ward serves the community's Muslim population. Religious offerings, small shrines and pictures of deities are a regular fixture in homes as well. There are a few small establishments—butchers, a bakery and dry goods retailers. The main thoroughfare becomes a hive of activity in the afternoons as minibuses blaring music stop briefly to deposit passengers returning from jobs outside the area. The bustle continues long after darkness has fallen, some residents setting up shop at street corners to sell cigarettes and sweets to passers-by with only the flare of a candle or *flambeau* (bottle lamp) to help them see, functioning street lights having long since disappeared.

To outsiders, Albouystown is the site of social *problems par excellence*. The first impression is a paternalistic perception that the area is poverty-stricken and needs to be helped by outsiders with the skills and resources to do so. Albouystown has become the best-known low-income urban community in Georgetown, resulting in it being the target of visits by numerous agencies and individuals representing private and governmental interests. Just before and during the course of fieldwork, six surveys were carried out: our research exercise, no less implicated owing to its interest in finding a 'suitable low-

income urban community', made it seven. The area has also been the target of urban development projects and charitable organisations. Notwithstanding these interventions, there has been little material improvement.

A second popular impression is rather less benign. Albouystown is an area that has been labelled as little more than a den of thieves and criminal activities. It is seen as a place to move out of once social mobility becomes possible (although not everyone who has done relatively well chooses to depart), and despite there being a number of well-placed and well-known former residents, achievements are applauded despite, not because of, the achievers having come from Albouystown.

Undoubtedly the problems of everyday life are painfully visible. Albouystown today continues to supply low-paid labour to the city. Residents find work primarily as factory employees, lower-level service sector workers, casual labourers and informal operators. For a few in the community it is mainly the informal sector that has provided a route to social mobility. Differences are expressed in the quality of housing and standard of life (such as the ability to regularly purchase consumer durables or foods—margarine, eggs, meat—that are now luxuries for most). For the majority of households, however, making ends meet in the face of low wages and prohibitive prices is a perennial hassle. Expenditure on home improvement is uncommon, not surprising perhaps given high levels of tenant occupancy (over 75 per cent). Many families reside in buildings that are in an advanced state of disrepair. Cardboard and newspapers are commonly used to create partitions in a single room to enable another family to move in, or as a permanent guard against leaks. Shared bathroom and toilet facilities are common, with several homes having none at all. Electricity cuts are frequent, garbage collection is non-existent, and the drainage and sewage systems have virtually broken down. Piped water in houses has been a rarity for over a decade, with residents frequently forced to create their own supply by breaking water mains. Physical deterioration apart, social problems are also evident: truancy and absenteeism from school; domestic violence; drugs and petty theft.

Residents readily acknowledge these issues (Plass 1995), but resent the way in which this is all that Albouystown has come to stand for to outsiders. When it appears in the newspapers, on radio or on television, it is most often in relation to crime or conditions of poverty. These representations not only help construct Albouystown as an area to be patrolled/controlled, but also establish class-specific points of definition, contrast and distance. Some women described falsifying their addresses on job applications because they believed that to admit where they were from would immediately disqualify them. The frequent reduction of Albouystown by others to the sum of its negative parts effaces from sight the fact that Albouystown is a source of identity and a place called home: 'From my experience...I can safely say Albouystown means a lot to me. The place holds a lot of memories for me. I do not want to live anywhere else' (Plass 1995).

Residents' awareness of the place they occupy in the national imagination has generated an oppositional identity that is regularly articulated (*'we all in dis thing together'*). It is further reinforced by the common conditions of life facing most households. Yet internal divisions also exist. Georgetown continues to symbolise an Afro-Guyanese space. Albouystown is somewhat different in that it has had a substantial Indo-Guyanese presence far earlier than most of the city, but this is no necessary guarantee of insulation from the wider politics of racialisation that afflicts Guyana. When it comes to the business of politics the community is predominantly projected as Afro-Guyanese (hence pro-PNC), eliding the historical existence of Indo-Guyanese (now approximately 35 per cent) and further reinforcing the belief that everyone votes along racialised lines.

Albouystown, then, is a place in which informal reciprocal networks (of goods, services, information, gossip) necessitated by the common realities facing a largely low-income community, have failed to temper the standard Guyanese fare of ethnic stereotyping and a pervasive sense of difference. It is these tensions that we wish to explore here. Nicole Bourque describes the daily work of making do as 'a symbolic practice which consistently evokes and reinforces social identity' (Bourque 1997:160). Through the prism of the family—whose importance, as we have seen in Chapter Four, has been underlined in the current context—we explore how 'making do' affirms and challenges gender and ethnic identities as well as perceptions of gendered and racialised difference for Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown.

Motherhood and female identity

Although wages continue to form the major source of income in Albouystown, dense informal networks of family and friends within and beyond the community play their part in keeping individual households afloat. Activating and maintaining these ties with others is principally women's work, a consequence of the emphasis on mothering and the obligations it is seen to encompass. Entailing the acts of giving birth and caring for children, mothering is regarded as an essential and irreducible component of adult female identity across generation and ethnicity in Albouystown. It makes persons out of women, confirming their sociability and signalling their insertion into a web of interlocking relationships, mainly with other women (see Sobo 1993). Younger women in general express a desire to have more choices about family size and certainly fewer children than their mothers and grandmothers. Notwithstanding these generational shifts, all women considered childlessness to be unnatural and used strikingly similar language and metaphors to describe motherhood:

To be a mother is one of the greatest things in the world. I think every woman should bear children, for if a tree cannot bring forth fruit then she good fuh nothin', she just barren.

(Amy, age thirty-eight, Afro-Guyanese)

All woman suppose to bear fruit, because if yuh got a tree and it nah bear, wha' yuh goin' do, nah chop it down?

(Baby, age fifty-two, Indo-Guyanese)

Women describe having children as 'proving' to a man. In having children, however, not all men or any man will do. Female sexuality is permissible within a monogamous relationship. In contrast, male promiscuity is sanctioned and explained as the outcome of a natural urge. It is called 'sowing one's seed', a striking reference to the arboreal metaphors women deployed to refer to their own bodies, and also a clear indication of the division of responsibility. Whether attributed to religious tenets or to nature, men's sexual drive and prowess are accepted (albeit not always acceptable) facts of life: *'A man is reliable to have a dozen women. But the Bible never compel me to accept and bless. All the Bible say is dat men mek like dat.'*

If a young girl gets pregnant, it is her reputation and not the man's which is most likely to be called into question. As residents say, when the bull is let out of the pen, the heifers must be tied up. The difference can be seen when public quarrels erupt. Men as well as women attempt to shame women by accusing them of sexual promiscuity. Women attempt to shame men by denigrating their sexual prowess or calling their heterosexuality or paternity into question. Few women would vouchsafe male fidelity; although desirable it is not to be counted upon. Instead a good man is someone who respects a woman (by not flaunting his affairs in her face) and is a reliable provider for her and her children (see also Chapter Seven). If he has other women, she must be—and be seen by others as—the 'queen'.

These ideas, and the inequalities they express, are enacted through the discursive construction of space. The public space of the street is the hub around which masculine identities are generated, the home the central domain for women. Men rarely have to account for their movements, whereas women may be called upon to justify activities that appear to be unrelated to the social reproduction of the household. This ensures female monogamy, but domesticity also extends mothering beyond the act of giving birth, as child-bearing *ipso facto* implies that the major portion of the responsibility for raising children and managing the affairs of the household falls on women.⁴ For men, on the other hand, a less intense involvement in and knowledge of the day-to-day activities of the household are considered normal, although women duly note and complain about the lighter workload this entails. In this respect, as Lazarus-Black (1995) suggests, the notion that women 'father' children in the Caribbean overlooks the fact that there is a clear interpretative difference between what is expected from women and men as parents.

Motherhood, central to the constitution of female subjectivities, is for many (particularly older women) a source of pride and emotional satisfaction. As a symbolic resource which women draw on, mothering is also an expression of and a strategic response to broader relations of subordination. The dominant

representation of women as dependants is assured not just through efforts to circumscribe female sexuality and the inscription of the domestic domain as feminine, but also via the secondary positions women generally occupy in the labour market. Notwithstanding the decline of men's real wages and a rise in the numbers of women working or seeking employment, more men than women in Albouystown were employed and at jobs that were more socially valued and rewarded. Women were predominantly domestics, salespersons, vendors, cooks, hairdressing assistants, seamstresses, waitresses and factory machinists. Very few jobs overlapped with men's occupations—as minibus conductors, masons, plumbers, chauffeurs, welders, carpenters, labourers and traders (see Chapter Four).⁵

These divisions were widely seen as reflecting masculine and feminine attributes and capabilities. Employers in the formal sector characterised women as economic dependants lacking strength and skill, to explain the positions women had and the lower wages they generally received. In the informal sector where most women were located (mainly as small-scale vendors), inequalities resulted from gendered disparities in access to capital, credit and the acquisition of technical training. Moreover, women's mobility and time (and consequently their income) was frequently restricted by household responsibilities. They operated in the Albouystown area or regularly took their young children with them to the markets and on the street in front of shops, where they sell the same goods as the stores but at competitive prices.

Within these broader limits, it is perhaps not surprising that children epitomise women's future investment. Set against the contemporary backdrop of scarce resources, children are also the basis upon which women hope to make a moral claim on the contents of men's pockets as well as gain access to wider kin networks for emotional and material sustenance.

Motherhood and difference

Motherhood is both resource and limit, as it extends possibilities and reinscribes hierarchy. Burton (1997:163) notes that the dominant conception of Caribbean gendered spaces is that men are on the outside looking in, while women are on the inside looking out. This emphasis on female domesticity cannot be apprehended without making explicit the overlapping practices that produce and connect 'inside' and 'outside', whose separability is readily assumed and whose gendered meanings are presented as natural. Burton's comment underlines the point that it is not that women and men are confined to one or the other domain, but rather that they have—and are constituted through—different relations to both.

Nor can we assume that all women experience these connections in the same way. Moving away from the assumption of female domesticity that characterised much of the earlier work on Caribbean kinship, researchers have provided critical illustrations of the ways in which 'inside' (private) and

'outside' (public) spaces (Austin 1984) become metaphors for talking about class, gender and race in contemporary Caribbean society (Douglass 1992). Historically the division of space had little relevance for enslaved and indentured women, except in so far as it symbolised their inferior status to white women. Today the involvement of low-income women in particular types of work in Georgetown is constitutive of their subordinate class position in wider society, perhaps most obviously when their employment takes them into middle-class households as domestic servants.

In the following sections we consider how Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown represent mothering in relation to the 'inside' spaces of domesticity and the 'outside' spaces of the labour market. Ethnographic studies of predominantly low-income populations have described Afro-Caribbean kinship relations as involving high numbers of female-headed households, kinship networks in which consanguineal kin and especially women play a central supporting role, and the primacy of the mother-child bond. In contrast, the basic unit of the Indo-Caribbean kinship system is pictured as based on marriage and the dominance of the male head (for a general overview of the literature see Barrow 1996).

Notwithstanding early evidence that ideals were frequently at odds with social practice (for example, see Jayawardena 1960), the predominant presumption remains one of culturally separate familial ideologies and practices, giving rise to images of dominant or matriarchal Afro-Caribbean women and their submissive Indo-Caribbean counterparts. By focusing on the negotiated and ongoing construction of female subjectivities against a backdrop of material constraint, we attempt to displace both these stereotypes (of unfettered Afro-Guyanese female agency and Indo-Guyanese female passivity) as well as the ahistorical and absolute cultural differences they presuppose.

Motherhood also means...

Indo-Guyanese women in Albouystown agree that sexual relations and motherhood specify a woman's attainment of adult status, but insist that they follow from, and are not prior to, the establishment of a marital relationship:

I did want to get married. To show the public. When yuh get married, I believe yuh come out of yuh home like a bride...yuh get the respect.
(Nadira, age twenty-six)

All women should have children. But yuh got to *first* be a wife and *then* a mother
(Devi, age fifty-two)

Yuh see, dis ting must be from Creation. Most Indians always married. Even if dey ent married legally, dey does married under bamboo [custom]. East Indian people believe in dis straight way.
(Halima, age fifty-two).⁶

Among older women this progression was guaranteed through arranged marriages, with children betrothed at an early age. Few now subscribe to the view that marriages should be arranged, and younger women, making a distinction between love and duty, tended to associate the continuation of such practices with their rural counterparts whom they described as having to succumb to familial pressures to submit to outdated customs (although as we shall see in Chapter Six this is not necessarily the case). None the less greater freedom on the part of individuals does not mean that choice is entirely uncircumscribed. While inter-religious matches are accepted, there remains an unspoken taboo against unions with Afro-Guyanese. This is not to say that they do not occur; women readily acknowledge that they do, but they are treated more as an exception than the norm.⁷ Moreover the superiority of marriage over all other forms of male—female relationships remains relatively unchallenged. To step outside of these boundaries is to risk social censure, because it can call into question the presumption that marriage is a natural aspect of Indian-ness.

Marriage is seen as conferring respect on Indo-Guyanese women (*'When you're a married woman wid yuh husband, yuh people does more honour yuh'*) as it sets the terms for proper relations between women and men. This norm finds further expression in the gendered delineation of 'inside' and 'outside' spaces. Becoming a mother and wife crucially involves a relation of dependence on husbands, to represent the family in the wider community and to be the economic mainstay of the household. The latter was exemplified by the comments of one woman who defined herself as *'a wife and a mother. A wife and a mother is actually the same thing. A worker sound so out of bounds.'* This does not rule out the possibility of taking up employment, but such activities are represented as supplemental and secondary to women's place in the home.

As mothers, it is expected that Indo-Guyanese women will work to ensure the reproduction of the norms of domesticity by preparing their own daughters for inevitable marriage and thus preventing any possible shame being brought upon the family by unacceptable female behaviour. Nadira, a twenty-six-year-old mother of six, admonished her eleven-year-old daughter who had not swept the house adequately before going to school: *'Wha' go happen when yuh get big and tek ab man? Tek man and do dub, and see wha' he go do yuh. He go just ups and lef' yuh!'* While boys must also become responsible fathers and husbands when they grow up, their behaviour is not constrained to nearly the same extent.

Consensual (common-law) unions satisfy the criteria of co-residence but are considered improper and less likely to generate long-term commitment on the part of men as providers, although a few older women did acknowledge possible exceptions. In other words, being a mother establishes a woman's lifetime commitment to her children, but it is by making husbands out of men that women feel they can maintain their own respectability and ensure that men meet their obligations as fathers. Given this equation, it is not surprising that Indo-Guyanese women overwhelmingly condemned non-residential

(visiting) relationships with men. They pose the leading threat to the norms of domesticity. By raising doubts in others' minds about the paternity of her children, they risk undermining not just the reputation of a woman but critically the economic security of her family.

Afro-Guyanese women also acknowledge that a woman's unquestioned duty to motherhood requires her attachment to a man at some stage in her life. However the relationship need not be exclusively defined through marriage, and finds expression in Albouystown in a fairly broad range of positions with no consistent ranking. Those prioritising marriage as opposed to living what they called a 'loose life' were mainly older women, all of whom cited individual religious (Christian) salvation as the primary impetus to legalise a relationship, albeit later in life and when one could afford a wedding: *'Yuh does get married because is a oneness of life dat God bless, he bless the wedding at Canaan [sic].'*⁸ However, many agree that having one's children outside of or before marriage does not carry the same stigma today as in the past:

In me day, if yuh get a baby and yuh [living] in yuh mother house, was a shame to the family, and if yuh ent married and yuh livin' wid a man, yuh wasn't allowed to tek communion in church. But not now. Once yuh live a decent life, people don't look into dem tings.

(Cecily, age sixty-nine, never married)

Religious imperatives to marry were mitigated by an emphasis on individual satisfaction and the establishment of relations of mutual respect, both of which it was felt were realisable through other arrangements: *'Marriage, common-law, visiting, for me one it don't mek a difference. For me, is according to how the individual treat yuh, dat yuh would know how to do tings.'* Personal autonomy from men was also a pre-eminent concern, with many Afro-Guyanese women across age groups agreeing that it could best be achieved outside of a marriage:

A good live home is better than a bad marriage...second is the visit. Dat way, yuh don't got nobody dirty clothes to wash.

(Shevall, age forty-five, common-law)

Well, I would say leh dem [men] come and visit me, because...I don't like nobody ruling me. Or I would rather live wid a man just so, because dey would tell deyself, dey marry you, dey got all the rights over you, but when dey ain't marry you, dey only got a certain amount of rights. No, I ent goin' be nobody Mrs.

(Dionne, age twenty-two, visiting)

Afro-Guyanese women are all too well aware that the quest for independence entails trade-offs. They agree that a man is more likely to desert his partner if the relationship is not legally consecrated, although the laws provide some guarantees (see Chapter Four on the Married Persons Property Act 1990):

From slavery days come to now, yuh's hear people talk about dis bastard child. But now the laws change...before yuh children had no claim on anything, but now after five years [of living in a consensual relationship] yuh is like a legal wife, and yuh got rights too, like anybody else.

(Shevall, age forty-five)

Visiting unions have least protection; women say that men are more likely to cheat and may contribute less to the home by virtue of living elsewhere.

The tension between having/keeping a man and being independent plays itself out as well in relation to the encoding of mutual responsibilities. Men are expected to provide financially for their children. In exchange women look after the household: *'Say yuh deh [in a relationship] wid a man, yuh must want to cook and wash and see be leavin' the home clean pon a morning, and when yuh do dem tings, be gone more [likely] bring money and give yuh.'*

Employment is also recognised as a legitimate and highly valued activity for Afro-Guyanese women, but discourses indicate that it is not compulsory in the way that it is for men, so that there is space for women to indicate a preference not to work (see also Chapter Seven). Motherhood is not negated by women having a job, although staying home to care for preschool children is considered desirable. In fact, participation in income-earning partly affirms and creates women's identities as good mothers looking out for and trying to improve the interests of the household: *'If women want to mek dey home a happy home, dey should wuk, when she wukkin' she know how hard it [money] is to come by...she got a different outlook, she know how to think constructively.'* It is related to the perception, noted elsewhere among Afro-Caribbean women, that 'my children are my responsibility' (Durant-Gonzalez 1982:4; Senior 1991). The primacy of the mother-child bond over conjugality is especially emphasised by a woman where there is more than one father for her children, a common occurrence where marriage is considered to be one possible option among others. As a fifty-one-year-old woman who has always worked, explained: *'He [her current partner] come and meet my children and me, and all got to be looked after...you see I have children that were not his. It was my obligation to look at [after] them.'*

Moreover, access to an income is depicted by Afro-Guyanese women as a means of attenuating male dominance within the household. Not only will men 'think twice', but they will also respect a woman who demonstrates that she is eminently capable of helping herself. Tellingly, Afro-Guyanese women described themselves first as mothers and workers. As one woman in a long-term relationship ironically noted, *'I guess I would always be a mother but never a wife, since a wife [job] is to look after the man and the man got to know to look after himself.'*

Less rigid prescriptions *vis-à-vis* marriage do not mean that Afro-Guyanese women and girl children no longer face gendered constraints. Daughters

should not get pregnant while still the responsibility of their mothers, for they can jeopardise their chances of finishing school, finding a job and thus becoming good mothers who can fend for themselves and negotiate their relations with men. Living 'a decent life' also requires a woman to be faithful to her partner. As such it is women in visiting relationships who are likely to come under most suspicion of being sexually promiscuous. As these tend mainly to be younger women, it is presented largely as a generational problem:

Is not respectful enough. Dat's a whore's life, dem women don't want to be controlled. Dat don't come under independence, dat come under going from Dick to Josie to Tom to Harry. It ent safe. Young people doin' it and dat's why dey life is so corrupt. Dis training the parents giving dem just slack.

(Mary, age sixty-four, widowed)

While a woman who bears children for more than one man also risks calling her reputation as decent into question, public attacks on her character will be mitigated if she raises her children properly and conducts her affairs with her neighbours in a respectful manner. Thus young girls are constantly under the watchful eyes of their mothers in ways that boys are not. Ultimately, the consequence of the subordination of female sexuality, and the double standard this generates, is that it is women who solely pay the price for their 'fall from grace' (Williams 1996c).

Dominant (Afro-Guyanese) mothers, submissive (Indo-Guyanese) wives?

Discourses concerning the representation of inside-outside spaces in Albouystown, as well as the social practices to which they refer and from which they derive their continuing legitimacy, are not absolutely different. On many counts both groups of women appear to agree on what it takes to live a 'decent life', with age also mitigating ethnic differences. Nor are such conversations imper-vious to change. Although they assume a taken-for-granted quality, they have 'a past and a future' (Moore, 1996:206).

They are historical in that they are the outcome of struggles to represent past actions. Stuart Hall succinctly notes, 'representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time' (Hall 1992:257). As we saw in the previous two chapters, the displacement of Afro-Guyanese women by indentureship led to their large-scale migration to urban areas in search of jobs. The ethnic divisions in the labour market that developed were further reinforced under the PNC and facilitated by extensive state control of the economy up to the late 1980s. In Albouystown these distinctions were perhaps less clear-cut given the class position of its residents and are even less so today—female labour force participation rates have risen across the board, and most

women were located in similar niches in domestic service and the informal sector.⁹ None the less more Afro-Guyanese than Indo-Guyanese women were in the labour force. There were more Afro-Guyanese women in the public sector and more Indo-Guyanese women in the private sector or in small family-run enterprises. Taken against this backdrop, Afro-Guyanese women's emphasis on autonomy from men is partly the product of a relatively continuous history of employment, which has enabled them to make choices (albeit limited) about relationships (although as we shall see in Chapter Seven this is more the case in some places than in others). On the other hand, Indo-Guyanese women's search for economic security through marriage arises out of their less consistent relationship to the labour market in the post-indentureship period, and their consequent dependency on a male breadwinner.

In related fashion, the importance of marriage to Indo-Guyanese is also the result of efforts to resist their exclusion and inferiorisation in the post-indentureship period by insisting on official status for marriages conducted under Hindu and Muslim rites. Afro-Guyanese women also emphasised that their views on relationships (specifically, that marriage is not the only route to establishing relations with men) were finally and importantly validated by legal reforms. Several women pointed to legislation passed during the 1980s by the Afro-Guyanese-dominated PNC that 'caught up' with kinship practices by recognising common-law unions and children born out of wedlock, although not women in visiting relationships.

Interpretations also have a future (hence the possibility of change) in that they seek to direct and represent contemporary action, but can never fully enclose 'the range of actual behaviour' (White 1992:10) that they claim to describe. This becomes even clearer if we look at the slippage between language and behaviour, between what people say and what they do (Moore 1996:215). It is here that the idea of a stable boundary between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women becomes most difficult to sustain. As Trinh T.Minh-Ha maintains in her critique of essentialism and authenticity, 'this is not to say that the historical "I" can be obscured or ignored, and that differentiation cannot be made; but that "I" is not unitary, culture has never been monolithic...Differ-ences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities—they are also at work within the outsider or the insider—a single entity' (Minh-Ha 1991:76).

The existence of 'differences within' was certainly apparent for both Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown. Notwithstanding the heavy emphasis placed on marriage within the Indo-Guyanese community, Jayawardena (1960) in his study of a rural community during the 1950s showed that conflict and dissolution were fairly common occurrences. Marital breakdown rates are even higher in urban areas (Balkaran 1983). In Albouystown the vast majority of the older Indo-Guyanese women had their marriages arranged at a fairly young age. In several cases these were terminated, with all of the women entering a second long-term common-law relationship.¹⁰

Arranged marriages are far less frequent today, and are more likely to be entered into where the potential spouse has migrated and can offer a route overseas (see Chapter Six).¹¹ This has led to an increase in the average age at which younger women get married. The average age at marriage for Indo-Guyanese women in the Albouystown survey aged 16–34 and 35–44 was 18.6 years, 16.6 for women aged 45–54 and 14.8 for women aged 55–77 years. Some younger women were also opting for common-law (but not visiting) relationships with the father of their children, and often justified it on the grounds that it was easier to be sponsored to go abroad if one was single. The decision *not* to marry causes some dismay on the part of concerned relatives. Older women bemoaned the fact that the younger generation was losing touch with the importance of the traditions that sustain an Indo-Guyanese identity, but disapproval was context-dependent. One group of older women (aged 52, 57 and 73) described a young woman in a common-law relationship as having ‘good sense’ because she did not want to affect her chances of migrating (her mother lived in the United States and was apparently in the process of sponsoring her), although they hoped that even if *‘she nah married legal, she must try and married bamboo* [in this case according to Muslim customary rites].’

Changes in marital patterns were accompanied by altering relationships to the labour market. As we have already seen, many Indo-Guyanese women were re-entering the workforce or joining it for the first time, although this was most difficult for young mothers with little recourse to extended networks of female kin to assist with child care. The economic situation has at one level underlined the solidarity of the family and paradoxically the sublimation of women’s identities within the domestic space; it is, after all, the defence of the family that makes it necessary for women to enter the workforce (although education is another contributing factor). It has also introduced new tensions. Female employment is certainly not new for many low-income Indo-Guyanese households, particularly in urban areas, but it is the intensification of women’s participation under conditions of rapid structural change that has presented the greatest challenge to the ideal of female domesticity. As we discuss further in Chapter Eight, women derived considerable satisfaction from having an independent—albeit small—source of income, and several entered into various inter- and intra-ethnic informal credit and saving arrangements with other women at their places of work.

These possibilities are not without their limits. Anita, for example, is a twenty-six-year-old Indo-Guyanese woman with six young children. Her husband allowed her to take a job, but only as a part-time domestic close to home, as he did not trust her going too far in search of work. Indo-Guyanese women do not work without the permission of their husbands, and the right to enter certain types of jobs is still a contentious matter. Women who work at nights—as security guards, waitresses or cashiers in fast-food stores—are typified as female heads, loose women or Afro-Guyanese, and an unspoken association exists between these three representations (Trotz 1998). Domestic

chores remain women's primary responsibility, and performing them inadequately could threaten their right to employment. In short, working women also work to represent their actions in ways that do not greatly undermine men's authority. As many women explained, mental and physical violence and withholding of funds can accompany men's determination to ensure that *'dey only got one man fuh dis house'*.

Wider familial relations play an important part in buttressing the symbolic status of the husband in the Indo-Guyanese household, notwithstanding (and in some cases because of) the woman's economic contribution to the household budget.¹² For instance, one woman cited child-care problems as a reason for not working. Neither her aunt nor her husband's mother who lived nearby would offer to look after her children, as they did not want to encourage her to do anything that might be construed as challenging her husband's authority. This underlines the importance of moving beyond an isolated focus on the household to include the part played by more extensive kinship networks in maintaining gender and ethnic norms.

The image of Afro-Guyanese women carving out autonomous spaces from men also calls for closer interrogation. Older women, who can only find work in the informal sector or as domestics, point out that there are more educational and employment opportunities for women today. They warn, however, that greater 'freedom' comes with diminished responsibility, threatening both the family and future prospects; young girls are 'getting children', and have little interest in being good mothers. Instead they move from one relationship to another, and it is older women who end up having to care for their grand-children. These representations do not necessarily correspond with the details of older women's lives. Most could cite having more than one relationship or father for one's children, while the practice of mothers caring for their daughter's children is by no means a new phenomenon. Instead, such discursive references to the past serve to establish limits on the behaviour of young girls, themselves potential mothers.

In fact, the dramatic decline of real wages in the formal sector severely limits the ability of younger Afro-Guyanese women to translate their educational advantage over their older counterparts into labour market opportunity. Lower-level jobs hold little appeal, particularly in the public sector. Many informal workers with some secondary schooling indicated they would earn far less if they sought formal employment. The imperative for women to work co-exists with continued—even intensified—economic dependence on men and little questioning of the gendered division of domestic responsibilities. Afro-Guyanese women in relationships may also face restraints on their freedom of movement outside of the household, because it can leave them open to charges of promiscuity. Women are equally if not more suspicious of men philandering (as we shall also see in Chapter Seven), but can rarely exercise the power of (often violent) constraint. When it comes to the family one could argue that the rule is one of male prerogative and female obligation.

As Daniel Miller (1994) has noted for Trinidad, the conditions under which low-income women are forced to cope signal not independence but frequently poverty and depression (see also Barrow 1996; Senior 1991).

It would be a mistake to assume that Afro-Guyanese women who head their own households—54 per cent of the women surveyed—do not experience such restrictions, especially given that some 20 per cent were in non-residential relationships with men. As we have already seen, visiting relationships are discursively constructed by some Afro-Guyanese women as providing more space and freedom within the domestic domain. Yet they may also heighten men's imperative to control, translating into efforts to severely circumscribe women's activities. It was female heads who indicated that their partners preferred them not to work, because they feared that they might be out with other men. It is primarily older female heads with adult children who are most likely to eventually achieve autonomy from men (Williams 1996), but given their precarious position in the labour market and the insubstantial level of pensions, it is also older women who often have least economic security.

To sum up this section, expressed desires for economic and personal autonomy among Afro-Guyanese women are continually undercut by the conditions of employment women confront and the unequal responsibilities that they must shoulder within the domestic domain. The apparent reliance on a male breadwinner among Indo-Guyanese women is belied by the increasing need for women to enter the workforce and the issues this raises within the household. Generational differences lead older women to conclude that while younger women have some more opportunities than in the past, they are also less influenced by the 'moral and self-respecting' ties that once bound households, families and communities together. Moreover, these changes not only distinguish one woman from another, but may also be experienced over a single woman's life cycle. In the final analysis, it is impossible to retain any notion that Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese constitute two separable, internally coherent and ontologically given groups. At the very least, what we appear to end up with instead are more overlapping lines of connection than parallel points of departure (Drummond 1980).

'We is (still?) different nation'

Culturally separate scripts, conceptually and theoretically available to academics, are impossible to sustain amongst the minutiae and complexity of everyday life in the Caribbean (R.T.Smith 1996:10). As low-income workers, women are coming into daily contact with each other. As mothers, they are involved in supportive inter-ethnic networks, and establishing fictive kinship with immediate neighbours to establish relations based on reciprocity and respect. Drawing on fieldwork in Trinidad, Kevin Yelvington (1995a:220–3) has suggested that the construction of Caribbean female gender identity as nurturing and co-operative makes it possible and necessary for women to

maximise their options, and this is especially emphasised in a context of scarce resources and poverty. It follows that this is not an option similarly available to men, for masculinity is the 'competitive ethic' writ large (Yelvington 1995a: 221; Brana-Shute 1979; Sampath 1993).

It would, however, be difficult to translate female sociality unproblematically into a case for an incipient and ongoing gender solidarity, a point which Yelvington himself makes clear. As Daniel Miller notes, the ideology of difference persists in Trinidad despite the fact that 'actual ethnic distinctions in familial practices have drastically reduced' (Miller 1994:143). In Guyana, where the process arguably has a longer and more polarised history than Trinidad, widespread social and economic dislocations have been accompanied by and productive of an intensified we/they discourse. This was exemplified in Albouystown by the generation of stereotypes among women that rework the inside-outside distinction to produce racialised subjectivities based on notions of self and other.

In Guyana as elsewhere in the Caribbean marriage denotes class hierarchy and religiosity (Lazarus-Black 1994:211–19), but it is additionally remarked upon as an integral constituent feature of Indo-Guyanese identity (Jayawardena 1960, 1962; R.T.Smith and Jayawardena 1958, 1959). Marriage is not simply an effect of difference, but a way of making and marking ethnic difference (and recognising oneself) that was commonly invoked by women:

Yuh see, all like how we are East Indians, yuh can't live with a boy, yuh must get married. But Black people, dey get plenty children before dey get married, and dey married when dey get big. Dey culture different.

(Halima, Indo-Guyanese, age fifty-two)

Indians different from the other rest of nation. All like we, we would [bellivin' home good, gettin' treat good and satisfy with dat, but not dem. Dey don't want to know yuh gettin' treat good, dey would want to hear 'bout *Mrs* Lall or *Mrs* Ramsaroop or *Mrs* Khan, is so dey would want it.

(Phyllis, Afro-Guyanese, age thirty-seven)

Difference, moreover, was not just recognised but ranked, with self-definition achieved through opposition to a stereotyped and devalued other. Indo-Guyanese women were represented as submissive, even stupid, and completely unable to fend for themselves:

East Indians does marry the children off at 12 or 13...and the husband does treat dem real bad. Dey frighten, frighten. Dem ent got guts like Black women. The mother does bring dem up softie. Dey ent got the experience to move around. I does seh dey go straight from dey mother house, straight to a man house.

(Shevall, Afro-Guyanese, age forty-five)

The unspoken contrast presumed here is between Afro-Guyanese women's work and mobility outside of the home, which enable them to make choices *vis-à-vis* men, and the restrictions Indo-Guyanese mothers place on their daughters' movements in order to prepare them for a life of marriage and domesticity.

Afro-Guyanese women, on the other hand, were depicted as sexually promiscuous and streetwise:

Black people, well duh's the wild west, I don't know if is dey culture or wha', yuh see dey is a different race. If I was a man, I woulda seh why buy a pound of beef [get married in order to establish sexual relations] when I could catch a whole pound free [have sexual relations with no emotional or financial commitment]?

(Indira, Indo-Guyanese, age thirty-three)

Here it is the familial values of Indo-Guyanese—symbolised by the proper comportment of women—that are set against the absence of a 'respectable' and 'orderly' family life among Afro-Guyanese, a state of affairs that leads to women having *'ten belly [children] fuh ten men'*.

Stereotypes surrounding the female body were also common in symbolising ethnicity. Purported phenotypical differences (further stratified on the basis of colour, hair texture and features) are taken as denotative of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese, but modes of interaction and style play a critical part in confirming the two as distinct. In the following example an Indo-Guyanese woman located the different familial practices of Afro-Guyanese in stereotypes relating to the behaviour of women:

To have children and don't live with dem is a curse. Is only Negro people does do dat, no respect and no love shown. Is by dey don't really got shame. Yuh ever see Coolie people walking around wid all dem dress style, cut away and so, those clothes wha' dem Negro people does wear? Is mostly Negro people don't got father fuh dey child. When yuh see dem bubblin' and winin' [highly sexualised dancing, usually to calypso and reggae/dub music] wha' dey does go on wid, wha' yuh tink [expect]?

(Nadira, age twenty-six)

Gendered perceptions of dress and performance become arbiters of cultural differences, symbolising contested relationships to space (Crain 1996; Streicker 1995).¹³ In the above quotation, Afro-Guyanese women—the 'Negro people'—stand in for their racialised community, made to bear the responsibility of reproducing and transmitting ethnic identity. It is the notion of women transgressing space (by wearing dresses which display and sexualise the body and through women's occupation of public spaces at night to 'party') which establishes the terms by which Afro-Guyanese women are seen as other, and

Afro-Guyanese family life is constructed as inferior. Implicit in this is the inability of Afro-Guyanese men to impose feminine respectability on their women, the criterion for social mobility.

A contrasting image obtained for Indo-Guyanese women, stereotyped as being modest in order to hide the bruises routinely inflicted upon them by violent husbands. Thus one Afro-Guyanese woman, despite her contention that all men were potential 'has-beens' rather than 'husbands', could also assert that *'Tse seh if I was a Indian woman I woulda tek a Black man, I didn't tekkin' no Indian man fuh married.'* They were also represented as having little taste and demonstrating a proclivity for wearing bright uncoordinated colours. Indo-Guyanese gender relations are depicted as backward 'coolie' traditions, set against a creolised modernity named as Afro-Guyanese and embodied by a woman who can fend for herself.¹⁴ Within the terms of this discourse, then, what gets identified as a hybrid practice ('mix up', 'all nation' or 'cook up rice' in local parlance) can easily reveal itself to be an act of appropriation. Rather than demonstrating the instability of cultural boundaries, hybrid practices may actually end up reinforcing them:

In dis time wha' yuh watching, the Indian woman and the Black woman, is the same ting. I know a Indian woman, if yuh see she today ...she dressing like the Black woman, and everyday to besides, she living life like a Black girl, most of dem perming up dey hair, going to parties and so on.

(Phyllis, Afro-Guyanese, age thirty-seven)

In a sense, the conclusions drawn by Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women were based not only on stereotypes about each other. They were located within representations of their own group experiences arising out of the specific histories of domination and struggle—outlined in Chapter Three—which are now claimed as their exclusive and heritable property (Williams 1991). That is to say, conversations about each other are at the same time—or even primarily—about oneself (interpreting or making sense of simplified versions of another's experiences within the terms of one's own conceptual grid), and result inevitably in talking past each other. Thus, what Indo-Guyanese women identified as the security and social identity gained via marriage, Afro-Guyanese women derided as submissiveness. What Afro-Guyanese women articulated as the possibility of personal autonomy from male domination, Indo-Guyanese women dismissed as immorality.

Constructions of ethnicity also exemplify a tension between being and becoming, illustrating the naturalisation of social inequalities in a class-stratified society (Stolcke 1993). At one level actions singled out by women as signifying ethnic difference are noted as inherent expressions of presumed racial distinctiveness, as in *'Negro is a different race of people'* or *'Indians different to the other rest of nation'*, that qualify some more than others for

social mobility. At the same time, one gets defined by what one does, although there is a thin line between what one does and what one is (see Streicker 1995). Class is a critical modifier of this equation (and we have already seen in Chapter Two how it mediated and modified the way in which one researcher was differently received by Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women), but there is always the danger that slippages will be taken as evidence that one's 'true nature' is showing itself (Williams 1991).

With regard to the latter point, it is tempting to argue that it is the gender ideology seen to embody the Indo-Guyanese family (and which as we have seen is not consonant with actual social relations between 'real' women and 'real' men) that most closely approximates middle-class norms in Guyana.¹⁵ Daniel Miller has suggested that in contemporary Trinidad it is the Indo-Trinidadian family that gets represented as the bastion of such values as stability and an orientation to the future (Miller 1994:142–3). Kevin Yelvington identifies a somewhat similar viewpoint held by some Trinidadians that although everyone understands what respectable behaviour constitutes, it is predominantly Indo-Trinidadians who actually manage to achieve respectability (Yelvington 1995a:184).¹⁶

We do not have sufficient material to be able to discuss this point fully, both because of a lack of class differentiation in the sample, and also because for the vast majority of the women in all three communities, daily survival rather than upward ascension was their principal preoccupation. Based on our interviews, we would submit that marriage has associations with class hierarchy, religious salvation and Indo-Guyanese ethnic identity, and can signify them together or separately depending on the context. Recalling R.T.Smith's comment on Caribbean class relations that 'the way of life of the poor would be denigrated no matter what its content' (R.T.Smith 1988:184), both the so-called lack of family life among low-income Afro-Guyanese as well as the so-called backward customs of their Indo-Guyanese counterparts are discursively drawn on as signs of inferiority. Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown are only too well aware and critical of how they stand *vis-à-vis* wider society—'*Not because dey livin' so and putting out a good front means some of dem upper-class ones [women] ent goin' through the same problems, ent sufferin' the same way*'—even as they participate in the production of such discourses about themselves.

Is it possible to reconcile this discussion about difference with the importance of motherhood to *both* Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women, or the evidence that increasingly there is little to distinguish the levels and quality of employment faced by women in Albouystown? The material presented here suggests that the social may be mediated by and thus open to different and competing meanings (Bourque 1997). This is not to say that the interpretations invoked are arbitrary, or that everyone has the same or equal access to them. On the contrary, they derive from collective past acts, presumptions of future behaviour and personal biographies. It would therefore

be simplistic to interpret the convergence of social practice in the context of economic change simply as a survival strategy operating independently of existing configurations of gender and ethnicity, or to romanticise the potential of individual acts to rework such discourses (Abu-Lughod 1990; Behar 1993).

In her discussion of women traders in urban South India, Johanna Lessinger (1989) argues that women, caught in the contradictory forces of economic necessity and ideological constructions of female passivity, invoked images of 'sacrificial motherhood' to lend legitimacy to their economic activity outside the home. If we return, as one example, to consider how the Indo-Guyanese women represented employment in terms of helping the household as good wives and mothers, we can see how their participation in the labour force might be accommodated (and ultimately sanctioned by men) without appearing to present a severe challenge to existing hierarchies of gender within the household and while still preserving the discursive division—reproduced through the deployment of stereotypes—between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women. Moreover, exceptions to a generally perceived rule do not necessarily displace stereotypes (although they may have consequences for the transgressor); being exceptions they can be explained away or ignored with little repercussion for the way that group identity is represented (Yelvington 1995a: 154–5).

While it is undeniably in the slippage between norms and practices that we can locate a space of radical contingency, it is also the case that reconsolidation rather than rupture may be the outcome: 'The long-term significance of change is never assured: it can be neutralised by classification as anomalous or exceptional, or colonized by incorporation into existing roles and the relations they express' (White 1992:162). In short, how disjuncture is represented and accommodated within hegemonic discourses should also be a critical focus of inquiry (Moore 1996; Williams 1991).

Conclusion

In Albouystown the demands placed on the family as a result of structural economic change have paradoxically underlined women's contributions while limiting their options. At the same time, it would be a mistake to unduly privilege gender independently of its construction through other social relations. The high degree of co-operation at the household level reinforces women's identification with the family even as it reinscribes their unequal position within it. Furthermore women do actively invest in ethnic identities, although it ultimately facilitates their subordination to ('their') men. Stereotypes continually reinvoke and reinvent boundaries, limiting alternative possibilities of doing and imagining gender. By presenting ethnic groups as coherent and singular they gloss over ongoing internal hierarchies, negotiations and dissonances—between women and men, the young and the old, the married and unmarried. In short, what it means to be an Afro-Guyanese or Indo-

Guyanese woman is not static, and female subjectivities are intimately and actively implicated in this process via a complex of identification and resistance. At the same time the belief that inherent and ahistorical 'cultural' differences exist does not appear to have fundamentally shifted. It is the various discursive notions of family—as community, as kin, as ethnic group—that, left unproblematised, obscure the unequal ways in which women are included within it.

What is ascribed and claimed as Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese is the product of specific histories that are also constructed with reference to each other, resonating with the ways in which ethnicity is represented in contemporary Guyanese society. To depict Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese as culturally different is to fail to recognise linkages and hybrid practices, and to see that racialised differences are constructed across shifting fields of power. In Albouystown, this leads to silences about the shared lack of resources and power for both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women, but it also reinforces the perception among élites that the problems of Albouystown are purely internal and have absolutely nothing to do with them.

Notes

- 1 Brackette Williams's discussion builds on—and provides a gender dimension largely absent from—her earlier and highly detailed account of how stereotypes and attitudes regarding work sustain pervasive notions of ethnic difference in a rural Guyanese community. She shows how arguments about inherent propensities get harnessed to a nationalist project that must emphasise that 'we iz all wan famili' while also taking account of whose ethnic contributions should matter—and matter more (Williams 1991).
- 2 The estate owner who originally provided the land was James H. Albuoy.
- 3 Georgetown has seen the development and rapid expansion of squatting on the outskirts of the city and in the heart of residential areas over the last decade or so. These settlements are home not only to rural migrants, but also to a large number of displaced urban dwellers, most of whom have either abandoned uninhabitable properties or simply cannot afford the increasingly high rents being demanded (Amin, Hassan and Charles 1992; Peake 1998). Although there are no statistical data available on migration patterns out of Albouystown, several families had moved to squatting settlements over the course of fieldwork.
- 4 This does not mean that women must care for all children they bear, but rather that women, by virtue of giving birth, are 'naturally' more suited to raise children than men (even if they are unable to have children themselves). As Julie, a sixty-nine-year-old woman stated, '*Well, all women does come to multiply, but some of us don't come to multiply, we come as caretakers of other women's children.*' Fostering children to relatives and friends—for various reasons—is a common practice in the Caribbean (Senior 1991). Around 10 per cent of the women in Albouystown did not have all of their children living with them.
- 5 In some areas the differences do not appear as marked. Within the informal sector, for instance, there is little spatial segregation, but this does not necessarily mean that women and men engage in the same activities, on the same scale, or earn the same amounts. In the formal sector there is increasing evidence that (predominantly Afro-Guyanese) women are entering the private security industry as guards, but their

- concentration at the lowest ranks of the service, combined with pervasive gendered stereotypes, ensure their relative subordination to male officers and supervisors (Trotz 1998).
- 6 Several of the Indo-Guyanese women were married legally according to customary Hindu and Muslim rites (49 per cent of the women were Hindu, 18 per cent Muslim and 31 per cent Christian); in some cases these ceremonies were not legalised.
 - 7 Nine of the Indo-Guyanese women were in common-law relationships with Afro-Guyanese men. They were twice as likely to be employed than women married to Indo-Guyanese men. Interestingly, only one of the Afro-Guyanese women was in a relationship with an Indo-Guyanese man; she was not employed. We do not have the material here to explore the possible reasons behind this apparent tendency for Indo-Guyanese women to engage in inter-ethnic relationships to a greater degree than Indo-Guyanese men. For a recent analysis of Trinidad, which locates similar patterns as the consequence of contrasting kinship rules (the patrilineal bias among Indo-Trinidadians and matrilineality among Afro-Trinidadians militates against Indo-Trinidadian men entering into relations with Afro-Trinidadian women), see Birth 1997 (but see Khan 1998; Segal 1998). Also see Yelvington (1995a), who suggests that aesthetic biases combined with stereotypes of Afro-Trinidadian women as domineering work to discourage Indo-Trinidadian men from entering into relations with them.
 - 8 Eighty-five per cent of the Afro-Guyanese women were Christian, and 1 per cent Muslim. Similar findings about religious concerns have been noted elsewhere in the English-speaking Caribbean, although the meaning of marriage shifts higher up the social order to reflect concerns with legitimacy, economic security and social mobility (Douglass 1992; Lazarus-Black 1994).
 - 9 In Georgetown there is a discernible ethnic division of labour in the informal sector; Indo-Guyanese predominate in the marketing of agricultural goods, while Afro-Guyanese mainly retail imported items such as toiletries, clothes, housewares and tinned foods. This reflects historical patterns of residential settlement in that Indo-Guyanese commute from rural areas to markets in and around the city to sell their produce. Given that our survey was carried out with an urban population with no access to land, these differences were not reflected here.
 - 10 Not surprisingly, given the importance attached to marriage, most of the women described their own experience as an anomaly, which did not alter their view that their own daughters must be married. Most of the Indo-Guyanese women in common-law relationships initially self-identified as married, and always embarked on explanations of why they happened to be in a common-law relationship which, as we shall see later, tended to be associated with Afro-Guyanese.
 - 11 It should be noted, however, that such arrangements are a common strategy for younger women in general seeking to migrate.
 - 12 The joint or extended family pattern—in which a young married couple ideally lives initially with the husband's parents—seen as characteristic of Indo-Caribbean family life was not prevalent in Albouystown, owing to the exigencies of urban life, tenant occupancy and the squeeze on housing. Some of the women had passed through such households, and most recounted numerous experiences of coming under the authority of their mother-in-law and being allocated a disproportionate share of domestic chores. As Vertovec (1992) has shown for Trinidad, however, the decline in the extended family should not be taken to mean that underlying aspects of family life—for example the close ties retained with the husband's kin—are abandoned.
 - 13 We are concerned here with how women represent each other in relation to dress. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find tidy distinctions between women were one to walk down any urban street. Bright or revealing clothes do not conform to

purported ethnic divisions, and styling and alteration of hair by chemical processes is a widespread practice.

- 14 Creolisation is a term that comes out of the work of Kamau Brathwaite to denote the complex cultural exchanges between domination and resistance that constitute Caribbean culture, making it impossible and fruitless to search for purity or plurality (Brathwaite 1971). Yet it seems that there is somewhat less attention to the (lateral) cultural exchanges between what Brackette Williams (1991) terms the 'subordinated subordinates' (in this case Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women), an omission perhaps most striking for such countries as Trinidad and Guyana. Others have noted how discussions of creolisation in the Anglophone Caribbean have come to have strong associations with the Afro-Caribbean experience, implicitly leaving no space for Indo-Caribbean experiences to be seen as anything other than examples of either tradition or virtual obliteration (see Birbalsingh 1993; Moore-Gilbert 1997:195); in this sense it may be said that popular and academic notions are mutually reinforcing.
- 15 In some discussions this was acknowledged by Indo-Guyanese and (older) Afro-Guyanese women alike. This is of course based on material from Albouystown and is thus place-specific. As we shall see in Chapter Seven, in Linden there is a greater orientation among Afro-Guyanese women to be married.
- 16 There is an intellectual history to the term 'respectability' in Caribbean debates around gender, based on Peter Wilson's argument that women were repositories of respectable behaviour manifested via their involvement in churches, their emphasis on sexual propriety and their identification with the household. In contrast, through their involvement in the public domain and male-dominated social networks, men attained prominence as reputation-seekers, part of an alternative and oppositional value system (Wilson 1969). Wilson's work has been variously challenged on a number of grounds: for uncritically accepting dominant ideologies of gender; for ignoring the interconnectedness of respectability and reputation (and the power relations through which each were relationally constituted); for not taking into consideration the fact that investments in the familial domain among the poor might in fact be a strategy of resistance in the context of Caribbean social relations; and for assuming that 'respectability' cuts across ethnicity. As the discussion here suggests, discourses around respectability also involve the assertion of ethnic and class difference. For an incisive critique see Besson 1993; Yelvington 1995:163–85.

GLOBALISATION AND INDO-GUYANESE WOMEN IN METEN MEER ZORG EAST

Introduction

In this chapter we introduce a second case-study, moving our focus from the urban to a rural setting with an ethnically homogeneous population. Meten Meer Zorg East, with its sugar-based economy, has always been organised to produce waged labour power for the sugar estates and their global markets. The original plantation owed its existence to the European-controlled flows of slaves from Africa, while the village that formed on its outer limits arose out of the flow of indentured labour from the Indian sub-continent. From their arrival women have played an integral role in the village's development; as Chapter Three shows, employed alongside men as workers in the sugar estates, they have been utilised historically in a flexible manner by capital interests. Flexibility, however, increasingly seen as a prerogative of capital in current globalised flows, is also evident in the dynamism inherent in constructions of ethnicity and gender. Here we investigate the ways in which rural Indo-Guyanese women's identities are being negotiated, pinned as they are between the 'givenness of things' (Appadurai 1996:55) and the possibilities enabled by the globalisation of their social and geographical imaginaries. Our concern is to understand the implications of recent transformations in the conditions of cultural reproduction—in relation to waged work, migration and monetarisation—for the ways Indo-Guyanese women come to terms with the changes that globalisation is rendering upon the habitual practices of their daily lives. With a focus on the creation, occupation and transformation of the social and physical spaces of village life, the spaces in which the repeated performances of Indo-Guyanese women's identities takes place, we investigate the ways in which racialised and gendered identities are reinvented within and against the force of global relations and movements.

Globalisation: negotiating the habitus

That the world we live in comprises a system in which flows—of labour, capital, ideas, values—are globalised is well established (see, for example, King 1991; Lash and Urry 1987; Wallerstein 1974). Simultaneously supra- and

sub-national, and operating in complex and overlapping disjunctural fashions, these flows constitute a reciprocal reorganisation of the local and global (Hall 1996) and no longer allow for an assumption that flows come into existence only in Western metropolitan centres. Flows also originate in Third World villages such as Meten Meer Zorg East; flows of sugar and of labour power indeed, but also of household members and their cultural practices, values and desires. As Weyland (1993:216) notes: ‘...“inside the Third World village” is the outcome of the intersection of a multitude of flows, and the people’s making sense and use of them—or ignoring them, complying with them, at times revolting against them’. And as Massey (1992:11) affirms, much more than the mere recognition of these flows is required: ‘...what is at issue is the changing geography of (changing) social relations’.¹

That these global transcultural flows are ‘new’ is a more contentious matter. Stuart Hall convincingly argues that we now occupy a ‘new regime of power-knowledge’ (Hall 1996:254) (albeit one that is still centred in the West), which differs from earlier periods in its particular form of homogenisation, i.e. it does not attempt to obliterate other forms of culture or capital, but to work through them; ‘...in order to maintain its global position capital has had to negotiate, has had to incorporate and partly reflect the differences it was trying to overcome’ (Hall 1997:182). In the late 1980s capital flows in the Guyanese sugar industry, for example, and their regulation through global programmes of structural adjustment, have undergone a significant transformation.² The privatisation of management led to the re-entry into Guyana of Booker Tate, which has been undeniably successful in converting itself from a British-based corporation which previously attempted to embody the Guyanese economy into a much more decentralised and flexible form of organisation.³

Appadurai (1996) further specifies that the global system is new in that it is now characterised by massive flows of migrants and electronic media, leading to the expansion of the imagination (out of the rarefied field of art) into the practices of ordinary people’s lives, where it is both ‘...a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organised practice), and a form of negotiation, between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility’ (Appadurai 1996:31).⁴ Certainly, a focus on the imagination serves to obviate a focus purely on empirical regularities, that often obscure as much as they reveal. Prioritising flows of migrants, for example, at the expense of those who stay behind neglects how the dynamic between movement and locatedness, between staying and leaving, is a function of the ways individuals are located in the new global relations of ‘time-space’ (Massey 1992). And that these relations are a condition of, and are conditioned by, the increasingly globalised imaginaries of racialised and gendered subjects implies that it is only by contextualised understandings of these relations that we will understand their negotiation.

Global flows of capital from SAPs, flows of migrants, the contemplation of migration, and the monetarisation and globalisation of the cultural inputs of everyday life have become increasingly evident in Guyanese women’s lives in

the 1990s. What are the implications of their engagement in these global flows for the ways Indo-Guyanese households in Meten Meer Zorg East reproduce themselves and (re)construct their specific forms and meanings? Appadurai (1996:44) asserts that:

What is new is that this is a world in which both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult. It is in this atmosphere that the invention of tradition (and of ethnicity, kinship, and other identity markers) can become slippery, as the search for certainties is regularly frustrated by the fluidities of transnational communication...culture becomes less what Pierre Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation, the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences.

While the degree of fixity of the cultural frameworks within which embodied experiences are practised and through which identities emerge (Bourdieu 1977) cannot be determined at a theoretical level, Appadurai's (1996:55–6) stance appears to lend itself to throwing out the baby with the bathwater when he claims that although:

some of the force of Bourdieu's ideas of the habitus can be retained... the stress must be put on his idea of improvisation...where once improvisation was snatched out of the glacial undertow of habitus, habitus now has to be painstakingly reinforced in the face of life-worlds that are frequently in flux.

While Appadurai's habitus skids off into an always, everywhere realm of innovation and improvisation, some feminist critiques accentuate the unlikelihood of change. Also hanging on generalised frames, and emphasising how traditional ideological norms (read habitus) mitigate against any 'full' potential for change in gendered identities, the assumption is of an ontological norm against which meaningful change can be measured (see McClenaghan 1997). As Miller (1994) notes, a way forward out of these theoretical culs-de-sac is offered by Strathern (1991). Prioritising neither structure nor agency she puts an emphasis on:

... 'partial connections', sometimes linked, sometimes disconnected or transformed into alternative domains of objectification [suggesting] an habitus of bits and pieces, of partial evocations each apparently specific to its own level of perception but also partly evocative of some larger but again partial order. Identity is formed through such partial connections and differences...Rarely are [gender or ethnicity]

found in the complete or abstract form...they are experienced as partial orders, partial commitments to being a certain kind of person, and very often as ambivalence.

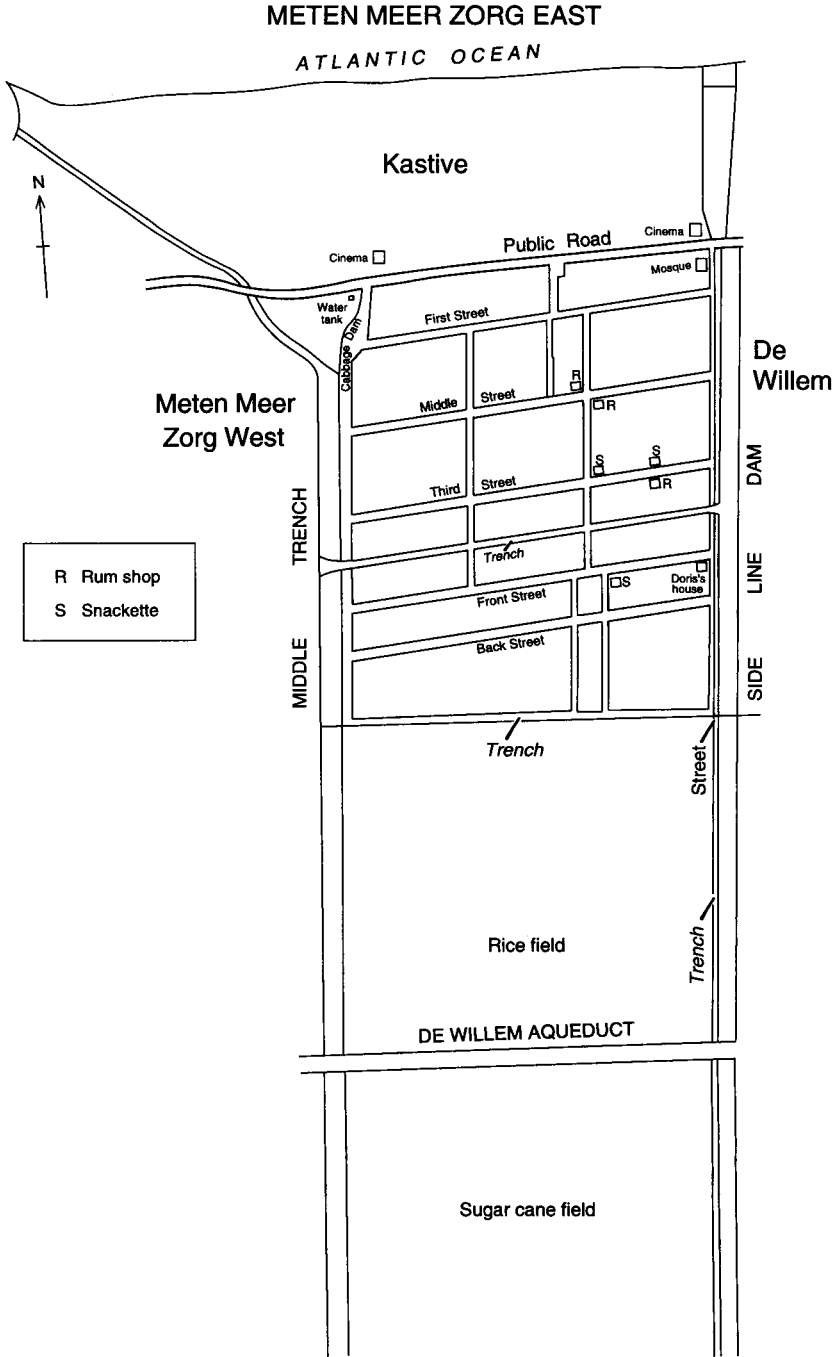
(Miller 1994:298–9)⁵

Indeed, ambivalence, contradiction and contrariness are all apparent in the ways women in Meten Meer Zorg East negotiate the local/global opportunities and constraints that now contextualise their practices of cultural reproduction. It is with these provisos in mind that we investigate how taken-for-granted ways of being and doing are being suffused with new behavioural and imaginative practices, for it is from this ‘tacit realm’ of the Indo-Guyanese habitus that the negotiation between structural imperatives and subjectivities is taking place.

The village and villagers of Meten Meer Zorg East

The original village of Meten Meer Zorg East, as of many coastal settlements in Guyana, has its origins in the production of sugar. The first (written) mention of Plantation Met-en-Meerzorg was in 1871 when it had a population of 739. By 1991 Meten Meer Zorg East and West had a joint population of 3,580 (a decline of 633 since 1981). Situated in Region Three, on the West Coast Demerara (WCD), the village is approximately 14 miles west of Georgetown. It is located on the main asphalted road between Vreeden Hoop on the bank of the Demerara River and Parika, a small market settlement on the bank of the Essequibo River (see Map 6.1). Travelling west along the coast road there appears to be no clear demarcation of villages although shortly after Meten Meer Zorg East the continuous line of economic activity tails off. Leaving the coast road behind one enters a village seemingly detached from the hustle and bustle of this public space. Its boundaries are demarcated by a series of canals, symbolising the rigid order imposed upon the coastal landscape by the drainage patterns of the sugar plantations. The village comprises two parts: a Housing Scheme and squatting settlement, a layout typical along the WCD. The origins of the current village lie in the 1950s when Booker McConnell Ltd built the Housing Scheme for its workers. With nationalisation and the decline of the sugar industry, the building of housing stopped and workers started to build their own, the squatting settlement emerging in 1975.⁶

It is within a few miles of the village, where Uitvlugt (pronounced Eyeflot) Estate is located, that the spatial parameters of the everyday lives of the villagers effectively appear to stop (although as we shall see the spatial boundaries of the villagers are being displaced). Within this short stretch exists all the villagers need—such as markets, schools, and hospitals—for daily life. In the village there are two shops and five ‘sheds’, most of which cater for rum drinkers as well as selling semi-luxury items such as Coca-Cola and basic goods



Map 6.1 Meten Meer Zorg East

such as 'aji' (monosodium glutamate), rice, flour, sugar, kerosene, cigarettes and Panadol. In the bottom houses of the homes facing the Public Road there are a few manufacturing enterprises, including a mechanic's, an arc welder's and a tyre repair shop. Entertainment also takes place in the village in the form of cinemas, rum shops, religious festivals and holidays and gossiping with neighbours.

The village is small, comprising six streets with approximately 140 houses in the squatting settlement and 180 in the Housing Scheme. The lots, arranged side by side, have an orderly appearance and the village is free from the unsightly garbage that clutters the streets of Georgetown. Even in the squatting settlement there is no appearance of overcrowding, expansion being well regulated. Villages such as Meten Meer Zorg East, with its sleepy demeanour and surrounded by the lush green of the sugar cane fields, appear to represent the quintessential 'traditional Third World' village. But as Weyland (1993) and others have noted, they are places where contesting notions of tradition and modernity are played out and social differences are inscribed in the landscape. These differences are clearly signalled in the mental maps of the residents: while the squatting settlement is described as a territory of mud, poverty and lack of entitlement to basic services, the Housing Scheme is depicted as a land of asphalt, piped water, electricity and other modern conveniences (although other differences are emerging as we discuss later). Indeed, the physical appearance of the Housing Scheme contrasts sharply with that of the squatting settlement. Its wealthier homes are distinguished not so much by the size of lot, which is standard, but by the large size of the dwelling. Yards are planted with flowering shrubs and plants that serve no purpose other than decoration. A few yards are given over to provisions (ground vegetables) or corn, but most exhibit bright displays of bougainvilleas, hibiscus and lilies and fruit trees such as mango, pomegranate, genip, cherry, tamarind, guava, sapodilla, lime, grapefruit, orange, banana, coconut and cashew. Plot boundaries are well demarcated, often with a concrete wall, serving not only as an indication of status but also to afford privacy. The squatting settlement provides a somewhat stark contrast. Space is less desirably located and the ability to occupy it is more restricted. Houses are not only smaller, but built with inferior materials such as *troolie* (ite palm) with wooden windows. With no paved roads and a virtual absence of planted yards the overwhelming image is of mud, which in the rainy season comprises a glutinous, black-brown substance, giving a feeling of desolation and squalor to the area and serving as a constant reminder of the precariousness with which the village has been carved out of the surrounding agricultural land.

While the socialisation of village spaces reveals differences between the villagers, they share a common way of life that has always been geared to the seasonal needs of the cycle of sugar, the material basis of their reproduction. In 1993 the majority of households were engaged in sugar production, primarily, albeit not exclusively, through male workers. Their common occupations and

origins, the lack of agricultural land nearby on which to grow cash crops, and their relatively recent settlement all militate against a class hierarchy. The village's agrarian economy supports only two social classes: proletarians, relying exclusively on wages for survival, and the tiny remnants of a semi-proletarianised class engaging in both subsistence farming and waged work.⁷ Those working outside the estate also share the same economic interests as estate workers, the local economy being dominated by the vicissitudes of the sugar industry and in particular Uitvlugt estate.⁸ Although wages in sugar are marginally higher than those outside the industry, even skilled labour at Uitvlugt is employed at levels below the socially necessary wage needed for survival.⁹ The changing geography and configuration of capital flows in the sugar industry have recently resulted in various benefits to the labour force, owing to the highly unusual concession in the management contract to pay higher wages and salaries than stipulated by IMF guidelines.¹⁰ The result has been an expansion of the labour force.¹¹ Since July 1990, when it was a derisory \$G50/day (when \$G45=\$US1) the minimum wage rate had risen, by August 1993, to \$G300/day (when \$G128=\$US1).¹² Despite these rises, wages are still among the lowest in the Caribbean sugar industry, placing residents of Meten Meer Zorg East among the systemically poor.¹³

A number of other features combine to produce a common lifestyle among the village's residents. The vast majority are Hindus but religious divides are of little import. Hinduism and Islam function as complementary ways of being Indo-Guyanese, with peaceful co-existence also served by racialised allegiance to the PPP.¹⁴ Inter-marriage, while not encouraged, is grudgingly tolerated but both Hindus and Muslims in the village join in each other's communal festivals, such as the Hindu *Phagwa (Holi)* and the Muslim *Eid*. Although religious ceremonies such as the Hindu *puja* and the Muslim *skereef* (devotional meetings held in the home, conducted by a religious official and usually followed by an elaborate meal) are widely attended, very few residents pay close attention to the specifics of the ritual. What is important is that they attend, thereby confirming their Indo-Guyanese identity. Most of the women in the survey are married by customary Hindu (68) or Muslim (7) rites, although nearly two-thirds of these have also legalised their marriages. In an 'ideal type' family power is vested in the father as the sole figure of authority but in practice there is a degree of latitude within families in terms of male pre-eminence (see also Jayawardena 1963). There is also leeway for children in the choice of marriage partners, who tend to live locally, leading to a virilocal pattern of residence. Families vary in terms of whether their primary association is with patrilateral or matrilateral kin and in the degree of contact with other family members, but relations with kin are commonly maintained through weddings and funerals and also through house-building activities and *pujas*, although the latter two are just as likely to draw on friends as kin.¹⁵



Figure 6.1 Selling in Meten Meer Zorg

Reproducing daily life

Necessarily a static picture, the above portrait does convey that commonalities of the rural, Indo-Guyanese working class in Meten Meer Zorg East, epitomised by common employment, residence, kinship ties and lifestyle, are also interwoven with differences. Variations in income, although small, when taken in conjunction with different family sizes, inherited property, prosperous relatives and the ability to read and write, can all provide the bases for differentiation in the practices of cultural reproduction. We briefly outline three activities—increases in women’s employment, migration and the monetarisation of everyday life—that appear to have the potential to further differentiate the “regenerative basis” of practices [that] dispose actors to do certain things’ (Jenkins 1992:78). The limits of the villagers’ habitus, the realm of everyday behavioural and imaginative practices of reproduction, are increasingly becoming globalised and transforming the discursive and material contexts within which Indo-Guyanese women’s identities are formed.

Women’s work

As reported in Chapter Four the majority of the women in Meten Meer Zorg East in the survey were working, albeit intermittently and often on a temporary or casual basis. The majority had started work only in the last five years, with the onset of a SAP for the sugar industry, and their employment constituted a significant change to the rhythm of their household activities. Mostly employed in the informal sector, these women were the first generation of non-agricultural workers. The older ages of the few women who still worked as weeders at Uitvlugt was indicative of the growing unpopularity of this work among younger women. Too many had witnessed the physically unrelenting conditions under which their mothers and other female relatives had worked and had no desire to follow in their footsteps; with increasing access to less degrading and physically arduous work, heavy field labour is increasingly incompatible with a female, working-class Indo-Guyanese identity.¹⁶

That engagement in remunerated economic activities is affecting women’s ability to negotiate gendered dimensions of the habitus, is most readily seen by women identifying themselves as heads of households. Working women are no longer readily accepting the ideology of the male breadwinner. While all the women in the survey who were not working claimed a man was head of the household, all the women who worked claimed they were heads of their households ‘because they did everything’, i.e. took care of the home and members of the household as well as bringing in money. As one woman exclaimed: *‘One woman here, when she first wuk she was not allow [by her husband] to go out. And now she wuk, wuk and things change. She gone go fly in plane to St Vincent, Barbados, and come back’* (Magret, age fifty-one). But the extent to which this is a permanent transformation, signifying a waning dominance of male authority in the household, should not be overestimated.

As we noted in Chapter Five, Jayawardena's (1962, 1963) research in the late 1950s was also indicative of the leverage employed women had to deviate from the stereotype of the submissive Indo-Guyanese wife whose sole duty was to be a housewife and mother, but whose husbands' low and fluctuating wages also necessitated a modification of roles and expectations. For these women, once removed from employment, the force of patriarchal principles in the ordering of household hierarchies of authority appeared to re-establish itself.

Women in the village also appear to have been more successful in negotiating the meaning rather than the content of gendered identities. For example, a rigid gendered division of labour existed in all households with none of the women in the survey believing men equal to women in their ability to do housework. The fatalism with which this belief was expressed resulted in the adoption of the identity of worker being attained only at the expense of women doing more. Moreover, the majority of women had a weak worker identity, their primary identity residing firmly within the family. In response to being asked how they thought of themselves (with more than one response being allowed) forty-four of the women identified themselves as mothers, nineteen as wives, fifty-four as housewives and only twelve as workers. That the family embodies the values to which women adhere and is undeniably the central expression of their identity and culture is evidenced in their inability to place themselves outside it. As in Albouystown, when Indo-Guyanese women have roles of both mothers and breadwinners, the latter is achieved only by being subsumed within the former.

The persistence of the ideology of domesticity, which places women in the home and leads to the self-perception of the women as wives and mothers rather than workers, is upheld by the intermittent nature of their employment and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms. But while the women subscribed to these norms supporting, for example, the belief that men cannot and should not do housework, contradictory elements were also evident, such as their assurances of being heads of their households. Although patriarchal control has been fully internalised and gendered relations have not been altered in any uniform or consistent way, it does appear they are beginning to splinter the more women become aware of alternative ways in which the Indo-Guyanese habitus can be constructed.

Migration

Although migration of women has not constituted a major empirical change to the activities of the majority of the village residents, its recent association with the promises of consumption has led to it being viewed as one of the most desirable ways to provide better opportunities for their children. While the number of migrants is small, the changing geography of migratory flows reveals changes in the purpose and composition of those migrating. The length of time migrants

had spent overseas and their various locations reflect the transformation of Guyana from a British colony and its increasing linkages to the economies of the United States and Canada.¹⁷ From the 1970s the favoured destination of migrants was the United States, especially Miami and New York, and Toronto in Canada. Of the approximately 300 households in the village only thirty-three people have migrated in the last twenty years; eight had gone illegally and ten legally to North America and fifteen to Caribbean destinations, most illegally. In twenty-three cases residents had gone for over five years and in ten cases for less than five years. Those in the latter category were mostly women travelling illegally, not necessarily to work, but to marry or live with other members of their transnational families (as unpaid domestic help) in North America. At the time of the field research another seven women had plans to migrate, all going to family, four in North America and three in the Caribbean. Three women intended to go alone, three with children with only one expecting to travel with her husband. Commonly, women now plan to travel without, or before, their male partners to increase their chances of acceptance.

It would appear that migration in the 1990s is neither a male prerogative, nor an urban one. Although they are at the bottom of the hierarchy of social space in terms of class, community and family, it is not unusual for poor, rural Guyanese women to migrate, and increasingly it is a common practice for the purposes of marriage. Nor are they unaware of the economic opportunities migration provides; with the trend towards the feminisation of low-income jobs in North America, women are in a better position than men to find employment. It is not surprising that members of the poorest households migrate; desperate to provide for their families, they are willing to undertake large risks to escape an increasingly precarious situation (just as the middle class is also escaping the inconveniences of an economy that cannot provide job and education opportunities). The economic benefits of migration to agricultural communities such as Me ten Meer Zorg East, however, have been unremarkable. Emigration has not resulted in any change in the class structure or social relations of production. Neither have remittances led to new income-generating activities or greater economic opportunities in agriculture, services or petty commodity production, witnessed by the lack of distinction of lifestyle between households who had relatives overseas and those who did not. Only thirty-six households had relatives living overseas and of these only a few knew exactly where they were. Those who have been gone for over twenty years or more appear to have very little to do with relatives still in Guyana and while those who left more recently send remittances these are not received regularly and cannot be relied upon.

These findings lead us to emphasise that a focus on migration as a primarily economic process and on migrants as embodied labour power produces what Diane Elson (1991) has referred to as male bias in the development process (in this case, accounts by men of male migratory patterns) and fails to capture the relevance of migration to the everyday lives of Indo-Guyanese women.

Migration cannot be analysed only in functionalist terms of households maximising income or of providing a 'cheap and flexible' labour force.¹⁸ In this phase of global capitalism, moreover, existing centre-periphery models appear insufficient to explain relationships between places. Caribbean-wide studies have shown that people migrate even when their labour is in demand in their home country (see Thomas-Hope 1992; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). Migrant communities overseas also create their own demand for migrants (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991); New York, Toronto and Miami are now autonomous poles of attraction in which (as we later discuss) Indo-Guyanese women who have migrated face different constraints and opportunities in their attempts to reconstruct the Indo-Guyanese habitus.

Monetarisaton

The demise of subsistence production by the villagers has led to all their transactions taking place within a cash nexus. Monetarisaton, in turn, has facilitated the globalisation of the inputs of everyday life, which is especially evident in consumption practices. While income from wages and remittances was insufficient for women to invest in productive enterprises in the service or manufacturing sectors, it has been invested in items such as housing and education that not only secure the reproduction of daily life of household members but also transport consumption into a realm no longer characterised solely by habituation and repetitive practices, but also by its ability to produce differences. Expenditure on the upgrading of houses, for example, is becoming a major source of difference among the residents. The distinctive meanings attached to housing in the two parts of the settlement are becoming unsealed: participation by some in the underground economy (of trade in cocaine, marijuana and gold) over the last decade has resulted in quick access to wealth that is now being ostentatiously displayed in larger homes and fancy furnishings in both parts of the village. More commonly villagers save for years to upgrade their property; a wooden frame is enlarged or replaced by concrete; a *troolie* roof may be replaced by zinc; glass windows take the place of wooden ones; a bottom house is added and fences are painted. The intermingling of new Western architectural styles with traditional 'Demerara'-style houses gives each lot its own distinctive stamp. Similarly, education, or more commonly, lack of it, serves as a marker of differentiation between villagers. Although education has been free for two decades the cost of uniforms, books, transportation, lunch and extra lessons is prohibitive for many households. Moreover, those children who do stay on to take CXC 'O' level (school-leaving) exams have an abysmally low pass rate. Indeed, many children appear to be hardly able to read even after ten or more years of schooling.¹⁹ Understandably, the attitude towards education in the village is mixed. Whilst there are households who firmly see education as the way to better their children's lives, some place little value on it, recognising that it no

longer necessarily leads to high wages, and yet others, who wish to send their children to school, have to withdraw them to help out at home or to engage in waged work.

Expenditure on housing and education are not the only indicators of the monetarisation of consumption. Increasing expenditure on household consumer durables, the majority of them imported, not only signifies growing monetarisation of daily exchanges but also the globalisation of cultural inputs upon daily life. Few women in the survey, however, have a refrigerator (five, although eight had an ice box), an electric fan (one), a stove (four), or a washing-machine (none). These are still urban, middle-class accoutrements of modernity. Washing is done by hand, either by the female members of the household or hired help, while cooking invariably takes place with kerosene stoves or clay firesides. That the drudgery of women's responsibilities for daily practices, i.e. cooking, cleaning and washing, have not been alleviated by new consumer durables is indicative of the low value placed on women's time and labour. Very few households had any other consumer durable—apart from a radio (forty-nine) or a sewing-machine (thirty), the latter not being a sign of status but rather a necessity for any woman who held a job as a seamstress or who made the family's clothes.²⁰ A television was undoubtedly the most coveted consumer item. Only five villagers owned one in 1993, although viewing television at a neighbour's house was commonly undertaken and looked forward to and ownership has rapidly increased since. While locally broadcast programmes have increased in number, the majority of programmes come from the United States, consisting of old comedies and suspense dramas as well as current soap operas, such as the avidly watched *The Young and the Restless*. Hollywood vies with Bollywood; Indian movies, both sub-titled and not, are also extremely popular. News programmes have also proliferated and one can wake up in the mornings to a choice of local broadcasts as well as CNN, NEC and BBC World.²¹

Women's expenditure on housing, education and consumer durables is linked directly to sustaining and improving their family's life. They invest in activities or purchases to facilitate the reproduction of the household, such as school lessons for children, as well as those necessary for the continuance of the life of household members, such as upgrading the home (Weyland 1993). A house, or a separate space in a house, for example, is necessary before marriage can take place and marriage in the rural Indo-Guyanese context is virtually an absolute precondition for the bearing of children and *ipso facto* the continuation of village life. It is, therefore, the efforts of women to reproduce their households that help secure their position in the capitalist system of production of sugar as a cheap and flexible labour pool. At the same time, women are gaining a say in household expenditure and are infusing the spaces of the home with activities they look forward to with pleasure, such as watching television, and as Appadurai (1996:7) notes, '...where there is pleasure there is agency'.

Spatialising the habitus

Women's engagement in waged work and their procurement of an income; their participation in migration and the development of the transnational family; and their efforts to improve the material bases of cultural reproduction, all appear to offer challenges to the construction of Indo-Guyanese women's identities. Yet these developments are neither straightforward nor uncontested. The power of enduring ways of being, which derive from the 'thoughtlessness of habit and habituation' (Jenkins 1992:76), and the interests they support, operate to hinder the formation of possible alternative identities. It is to the material and metaphorical spaces of village life, and the struggles they encompass, that we now turn to shed light on the ways in which the gendered and racialised form of the Indo-Guyanese habitus is being transformed. Women's positioning in relation to these spaces further requires an understanding of the ways in which spaces are imbued with meanings to which women may or may not subscribe. But Western assumptions and extrapolations relating to movement and confinement do not underwrite the ways women in the village interpret their experiences of space and place. They do not, for example, help us to unravel the apparent paradox that although women and girls in Meten Meer Zorg East are not willing or able to travel to Georgetown, more females than males migrate overseas. Western ideologies of spatialised opportunities, for example, that distance and travel are good and liberating while confinement is constraining and bad (Strathern 1996) and which emphasise mobility as a characteristic of dominant subjectivities and stasis, its putative opposite, as belonging to the realm of subjugation, have little purchase in the geographical imaginaries of the women in Meten Meer Zorg East.

It is by drawing on the racialised and gendered metaphorisations of mobility and confinement of the women in the village that we explore how they manoeuvre, and in the process transform the spatial dimensions of their habitus. We introduce these analytical concerns primarily through the eyes of one village resident, Susan, whose life experiences testify to the fluidity of gendered constructions of ethnicity. Now in her forties, she was christened Basmattie and given her calling (Christian) name by her mother's Afro-Guyanese neighbour. (At this time the village had not experienced the race riots of the early 1960s that resulted in the removal of all but one of its Afro-Guyanese residents.) Born a Hindu, she defied social conventions and converted to Islam on her marriage to a Muslim. Susan's behavioural practices exemplify the limits of manoeuvr-ability, evident as embodied tensions, as she attempts to ensure the continuation of daily life from within the confines of an identity struggling to negotiate between the globalisation of opportunities and localised resiliences.

Within the village there is an effective division of space into male and female arenas. Men, even if not working, are rarely found in the home during the day, preferring to occupy the male-dominated spaces of the rum shops, setting up a card table or 'liming' on the street. Places with a predominantly male presence,

such as the rum shops, the mosque/temple and the alley-ways at night are avoided by women who are closely tied to their homes, particularly at certain times of the day. The rhythms of their day are subservient to men's work schedules; most wives rise early, around 4 a.m., to cook food for their husbands to take to work, and they cook again in the late afternoon when their husbands return from work. The majority of women travel beyond Uitvlugt estate only occasionally to visit relatives, or to go to weddings and funerals.²²

As we outlined in Chapter Five, it is the repeated occupation of these spaces that has imbued their inhabitants with racialised feminine and masculine characteristics. In other words, men and women do not respectively occupy public and private domains predicated upon some essentialised notion of female and male, but through the repetition of a series of social practices in specific spaces. In turn, gendered village spaces, including notions of 'inside' and 'outside', are produced by the encoding and decoding of behavioural practices, processes that are based upon an '...underlying dualist habitus which... creates gender as systematic opposition in ideology and practice' (Miller 1994:264). Thus do representations of space 'arise out of the world of social practices [and] then become a form of regulation of those practices' (Harvey 1996:212), opening them to contestation and renegotiation. Women in Meten Meer Zorg East do resist both the routinisations of the spatialised practices that seek to contain them, and the discourses over the values with which these practices are imbued, but as we will see, resistances are both partial and uneven.

The domestic sphere and women's occupation of it represent the maintenance of practices and values of Indo-Guyaneness to which Susan subscribes. The repetitive nature of daily life, for example, the knowing of how each day will progress and the tying of virtually all women's activities to the home, the locus of the social life of the household, are valued for the security they provide, as Susan testifies:

When the rain falls the place gets very bad with a lot of mud. When I first came to live here I felt like to sell out my house and go back where my father live.... And now I get used to all this I love the place very much living with my family. My daughters grew up here from being six and nine years old. They are happy living here too. When we go out they want to be back home early. The place is very breezy and quiet. Also the people in this area are very nice and co-operative in sickness, death, wedding and so on. Unto now I feel happy living in this place because I got my own home.

The physical spaces of the habitus may be associated with squalid conditions and poverty, but they also provide a sense of feeling deeply at home. Yet the centrality of her home to her sense of Indo-Guyanese identity also makes it a site of transgression in her attempts to transform the material conditions of cultural reproduction.

Susan became active in the Women's Development Programme of Red Thread in the late 1980s and through her work managed to save enough money to upgrade her home (in 1993). Using relatives, neighbours and a carpenter her small house was dismantled and a virtual replica of it built up on stilts. Although the two bedrooms and living-room remained the same size they were augmented by the addition of a balcony onto the front of the house and the building of a larger kitchen. In addition, she purchased a water barrel and a small kitchen area was built up outside the bottom house and a clay fireside constructed, giving her the option of cooking inside or outside the house. The pit latrine and bathroom remained as small wooden cubicles in the backyard but further additions were a cow shed and chicken run at the back of the lot. Although Susan claimed that extra space was not required because there would be no additions to the household—tradition determined that her two daughters would leave to live with their husbands' relations—at the same time, in constructing a bottom house, she reserved the option of building another living space, enabling her daughters to stay at home after their marriages. Her control over the creation of this space speaks to her ability to finance the upgrading, but that Susan's house is more than an economic resource is evident in the way she transformed its spaces. Simultaneously an attempt to create a higher level of comfort, the changes she made also symbolise an attempt to change the rules of descent. Defying convention, Susan decided that her newly married daughter and son-in-law should live with her. A new bedroom and kitchen were added to the house for the newly-weds, financed by her son-in-law. Thus, housing the family, while obviously satisfying an economic need, also lends itself to 'a certain self-stylisation' (Weyland 1993:49–50), and thus a changing habitus.

New stereotypes about place as well as the geography of the social spaces to which villagers have access are also being transformed by the introduction of new consumer goods into her home. Susan's house contents comprise two beds, one wardrobe, two armchairs, two hammocks and a small cabinet, all locally made. An important addition came late in 1995 when she was able to tap into a neighbour's line and acquire electricity and, through hire purchase, bought a small colour television. The US daytime soap operas, in particular, brought knowledge about different, i.e. more desirable and glamorous, ways of life in a country where apparently the basic amenities of daily life could be taken for granted and wealthy people were the norm.²³ The television served as a medium whereby Susan and other villagers could identify with these foreign lifestyles and reduce the social distance between the reality of their daily existence and the possibility that one day their children would live in North America. To see a consumer durable, such as a television, solely as an item of conspicuous consumption is to deny its multi-functionality; while the television was undoubtedly an indicator of status it also helped satisfy the desire to adopt facets of a modern lifestyle and allow the villagers to bypass Georgetown, linking far beyond to the cosmopolitan cities at the nexus of global patterns of production

and exchange, thus serving as a resource 'for experiments with self-imagining as an everyday social project' (Appadurai 1996:4).

Such experiments are not always willingly undertaken. Susan had expected that her daughters would marry and settle down in the village or close by. Although she had no plans to migrate, as Appadurai (1996:6) points out, '[m]ore people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born...' Indeed, Susan's eldest daughter might well have had a radically different spatial trajectory from her mother, with Susan facing a future in which she might not have seen her eldest daughter again. A young man from the village who migrated to the United States in the late 1980s had been courting her eldest daughter and he now wanted her to join him.²⁴ He was willing to pay for her to come to the United States illegally, through a 'backtrack' ring.²⁵ If she went it was unlikely that she would return. The future that Susan had been expecting was being ripped apart as she attempted to come to terms with her daughter's possible absence. From living a spatially sequestered life, one in which she slept every night of her life in the same bed as her sister, only feet away from her parents' bed, Susan's daughter faced married life thousands of miles away from her mother and family, in an alien society, most probably as an illegal immigrant. It was living with and trying to come to terms with the tension of this potential divide that was literally making Susan ill.

Susan's story of migration illustrates the tension engendered by the globalisation of opportunities. It is 'betterment', the benefits of modernisation, that would accrue to Susan's daughter from migration—the chance to have money and material possessions—which Susan knew she could not provide that caused her not to dismiss this option. The United States is a place where, Susan believes, '*...life is cheaper although you have to work hard to acquire things and people dress neat and clean*'. She was assessing the option of migration in terms of her own aspirations for her daughter to have a North American lifestyle versus her sadness at losing her. Although her daughter was an economic dependant who could become a source of income on her arrival in the United States, the emotional cost of her departure would have been the main determinant of the decision for her to leave or stay. The potential migration of Susan's daughter reveals how economic and social opportunities are intimately intertwined with domestic relations; it is the household, guided by kinship and gender ideologies, that mediates global flows and individuals' decisions to migrate.

Migration, moreover, is contributing to an immense spatial upheaval in the Guyanese family, creating transnational households and contributing to the transformation of the hierarchical power structure of the household. Once exposed to life in the United States the children of migrants are less prepared to accept that they will have their partners chosen for them. Susan's daughter's suitor chose his partner himself rather than letting his father, still resident in Meten Meer Zorg East, decide for him. Migration has given family members, other than the senior male, access to economic resources as well as exposure

to different social and cultural practices, and younger generations can take advantage of this situation to gain more control over their lives. Although the tension between individualism and kinship identity is not a new phenomenon, migration overseas brings a release from the moral and physical confines of the patriarchal household, transforming the basis on which marriage decisions are made; the needs of the household to acquire a son or daughter-in-law who will be able to help in the processes of its continuation can become secondary to the desire to marry for love.²⁶

These findings reveal that migration from Meten Meer Zorg East is not so much about remittances as about the cultural reproduction of the group and the opportunities it provides to remain the same, i.e. to reproduce the racialised 'self' and its spaces. They also show that while Meten Meer Zorg East serves as a discursive space for the inscription of gendered differences, through the delimitation of male and female village spaces, it is also a discursive space for racialised differences in terms of its juxtaposition to urban places such as Georgetown, which is still perceived as being primarily Afro-Guyanese and thus a space of the 'other', and overseas metropolises, such as New York and Toronto, where large communities of Indo-Guyanese exist and which are perceived as spaces of the 'self'. Hence, Georgetown, while an important centre in the mental maps of the residents of the village, is not a place frequented regularly by the villagers. Women rarely, if ever, travel to Georgetown alone, yet travel alone overseas to ensure the reproduction of the 'self' is considered both safe and desirable.

The interweaving of gendered and racialised identities in these metaphorisations of distance is exemplified through mothers' spatial delimitation of the daily activities of their daughters. Susan's daughters spend their days at home helping their mother with the housework and cooking and watching their recently acquired television. Susan occasionally works from home doing embroidery (for Red Thread) or comes to Georgetown to work with Red Thread when they have work or training sessions organised. Over the last couple of years she has attended fewer sessions. Her health is failing and she suffers from high blood pressure and head pains. Her doctor diagnoses her symptoms as work-related, based on years of doing needlework at night using only kerosene lamps for light. But the stress in Susan's life comes not so much from work and not having enough money—she is used to having little money—but from her daughters. She was reluctant to leave them alone in the house for fear of burglars raping them. Neither did she encourage them to join Red Thread. This would mean travelling to town where they would be outside kin networks of regulation and control. Susan had paid for extra school lessons for her youngest daughter, in the hope that educational qualifications would enhance her employment prospects. Her daughter failed her school-leaving exams though, and both she and Susan are content for her to stay at home, all hopes of working, and the attendant anxieties of where she would work, having faded away. Indo-Guyanese women's roles as mothers serve to assure

that their daughter's social and spatial trajectories prevent them not only from encountering spaces of the 'other' but also from being 'entered' by the 'other'.²⁷ These unresolvable socio-spatial conflicts are internalised rather than displaced, witnessed through Susan's precarious state of health.

Although women participate in constructing the boundaries of both the material and metaphorical spaces they inhabit, male relatives also play active roles, inscribing their control over women's bodies (and minds) as well as the spaces they occupy (Alexander and Mohanty 1997). If women's relegation to the home is willingly embraced, allowing them (as far as is possible) to be beyond the reach of the 'other', they do contest men's attempts to control their movements. Norms of acceptable behaviour for Indo-Guyanese women, linked to concepts of pure and defiled spaces, impose a tight control over their movement although women in Meten Meer Zorg East have won some freedom of movement in the daytime. Within a few kilometres of the village they are free to go to the market and cinema; to operate female-based networks of exchange within the village; to visit relatives in villages close by; to maintain kin networks; to arrange education for their children and employment for their daughters; and to meet members of households which may provide prospective in-laws. These activities, all necessary components of cultural reproduction, as well as the recent foray of women into waged work, do not involve many opportunities for sustained or illicit contact with Afro-Guyanese men. All the women—bar one who worked in Georgetown as a cashier—were engaged in activities in or close to the village (which they had found out about from relatives or networks of friends and neighbours in the village); certainly no women travelled as traders. Their activities predominantly involved them dealing with other women as their customers or employers, working on their own and/or with other Indo-Guyanese women. Women's access to employment is still primarily mediated through (relations of subordination to) male kin, although economic pressures and the female networks that operate within and beyond the village provide both reason and the means to contest these relations. The increased freedom of movement that engagement in economic activity brings is a case in point. One young woman claimed: *My husband is allowing me to go anywhere since I am working* (Sunita, twenty-four years old). Sunita's husband did not previously allow her to leave the home except to go shopping, but once she had persuaded him of her ability to bring in an income her range of activities increased, although she still had to seek his permission to go out and she had no desire to travel outside the areas occupied by other village women. It was women's ability to engage in economic activities that did not require them to enter into the spaces of Afro-Guyanese men that made their employment acceptable. Working in spaces where they did not come into regular contact with Indo-Guyanese men was also encouraged. One of the major drawbacks repeatedly cited about domestic work for young girls, for example, was the realistic fear of being raped by young men in the employer's household.

Indeed, restrictions on women's movement are thrown into sharp relief when their chastity cannot be assured. Until puberty there is an intensely social nature to the everyday life of children who roam around at will; there is very little separation of a girl's world from a boy's. But, as one mother testifies, boys and girls learn from an early age that they will follow different spatial trajectories:

Well me mother does teach gyal children dem not fuh involve deyself in no problem, an' she does tell me not fuh go nowhere, mustn't got a boyfriend or go anywhere and talk to boy or so...I does more give the boys dem freedom. Send the two boys alone to the cinema or anywhere. But I don't give the gyal all of that freedom. Anywhere she does want fuh go, me does carry she out. How me parent did train me so I train her up.

(Sattie, age thirty-three)

Women's sexual behaviour must be spatially circumscribed, preventing sexual access to them by outsiders. Upon entry into puberty girls' interactions are restricted as they are afforded increased protection from the outside world and sexuality is privatised within the home. In Susan's house her daughters, aged sixteen and eighteen, shared the same bed. Despite the recent upgrading of the house the girls' bedroom was not altered. They would only need to sleep in separate beds once they were married when a separate room is necessary for the consummation of the marriage. Young women's mobility is tolerated then only if it does not risk bringing shame upon their families by their engagement in sexual activity outside the confines of marriage; as one mother explained: *'Gyal mustn't go behave bad, fuh go out of the way pon the street, an' dem mustn't bring shame an' disgrace. Dey fadder seb if anything go wrong to dem be go kill me and dem, all together* (Magret, age fifty-one). Not only the all-too-real threat of male violence, but disapproval and ostracism by the community, police the boundaries of women's socially sanctioned spaces.

No such restrictions apply to men's movements in the village, although their opportunities to travel outside it are constrained by their racialised perceptions of places of the 'self'. A few men travel in search of employment opportunities in Georgetown or go in the interior *pork-knocking* (gold-mining) or working for MNCs, although the vast majority work within a few miles of the village where kin networks can be called upon. Indo-Guyanese households have thus remained attached to the sugar estates for reasons beyond economic mechanisms of increased wages and improved regulatory practices. Indeed, the continuation of the system is only ensured by both employees and employers participating in the ongoing practice of racialised recruitment. This moral economy between worker and employer is well understood. Employers guarantee the loyalty of workers by ensuring the sons of their best workers are employed on the same estate (see also Jayawardena 1962). Such racialised

practices, serving as the primary conduit for households' access to scarce resources, help ensure their investment in Indo-Guyanese ways of life. Despite the low wages and the seasonal nature of the work, racialised recruitment, combined with a reluctance to enter the urban-based employment centres of the Afro-Guyanese, continue to ensure the villagers' construction as an abundant and cheap local labour force.

The racialised and gendered dimensions of Susan's identity profoundly affect her ability to create, occupy and transgress the social and physical spaces of village life. In transforming the spaces of her home and opening it to opportunities for expanding social and geographical imaginaries, but not challenging the gendered work practices that take place within it; by engaging in waged work herself but discouraging her daughters from doing so; and in her struggles to negotiate between her own emotional needs and the material prospects of her daughter, Susan's behaviour reveals the tensions she embodies, manoeuvring within and against the global and the local. Thus are the boundaries of the habitus simultaneously strengthened and dissipated as the introduction of new and the repetition of traditional spatialised bodily practices both facilitate and impede the constitution of new identities.

Conclusion: sugar, the sap of life in Meten Meer Zorg East

New global flows are undoubtedly affecting what it means to be an Indo-Guyanese woman in Meten Meer Zorg East. Over the last five years the village has witnessed a number of changes: an increasing integration of women into waged work; increasing numbers of women migrating to marry; needs being redefined at a higher level with encroaching monetarisation; and increasing globalisation of the inputs of everyday life. While there has not been any cataclysmic ideological challenge to traditional racialised and gendered practices, their recent globalised mediation has contributed to a slow transformation which may be indicative of a shift in dependence as the linchpin of the construction of a female Indo-Guyanese identity. Hence, some women in Meten Meer Zorg East are less dependent on male wages (so long as they can find a job), daughters have more choice regarding their future husbands (so long as they are Indo-Guyanese), some can now travel overseas (if they are going to family), and they have more control over use of household resources (if they are bringing money into the household). New cultural expressions of appropriate female behaviour are not so much dismantling but shifting and diversifying the nature and experiences of rural Indo-Guyanese women. Neither are they necessarily indicative of the Indo-Guyanese habitus disintegrating; continuity can be assured through the incorporation of new differences and the ongoing reproduction of racialised identities in national discourse.

The new geography of social relations within which they are embedded has also served to ensure the villagers' role as proletarian labour in the sugar industry. Indeed, the new regulatory mechanisms of SAPs have served to

further deepen their ties to the estate. Ironically it is the villagers' struggle for sustenance, played out through the 'moral' defence of gendered and racialised spaces of the 'self', that helps ensure the perpetuation of the economic system. It is difficult to say whether we should see this situation as symptomatic of the expansion of SAPs in Guyana or whether it is indicative of a long-term trend. The extent to which female Indo-Guyanese identities in Meten Meer Zorg East will continue to be constructed through things that are different or things that are the same will depend primarily on the future of the sugar industry, which in an uncertain world is itself unclear.²⁸

Notes

- 1 Massey (1992:11) further elucidates: 'And to analyse the impact of those changes it is necessary to take account of both sides of the formulation. *Both* the geography (proximity, time-space distanciation etc.) *and* the content of the social relations themselves (full of the implications of sexism, or the power relations of colonisation present or past or of the relations of capital accumulation) must be taken into account. Moreover, each aspect—spatial form and social content—will affect the other.'
- 2 In 1990 Guysuco commenced a recovery programme for the sugar industry, the aim of which was to increase production and to prepare a plan for longer-term rehabilitation with a view to privatisation. As in other Caribbean territories it was Booker Tate plc, the result of the merger, in 1988, of the two dominant British companies in the Caribbean sugar industry (Booker McConnell plc and Tate & Lyle plc) which won the management contract.
- 3 Thomas (1995 a:48) argues that Booker Tate's success is due to its pragmatic, flexible approach allowing it to be responsive to local circumstances: 'The company does not appear to hold *a priori* positions on such major issues as a fixed relation between divestment and privatisation of ownership. It seems willing to work for either the Government or private sector owner, to diversify or not diversify, as the situation demands it. From the company's standpoint, its task is to market its undoubted management capabilities in sugar to whoever is willing to pay for it.'
- 4 Appadurai (1996:31) claims that to grasp the idea of the imagination as a social fact requires bringing together 'the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations'.
- 5 Because people hold conflicting sets of values, Miller (1994:298) also argues it may be more useful to talk 'of "habiti" than habitus, or at least of a habitus based upon contradiction'.
- 6 Meten Meer Zorg East has one of the oldest established squatting settlements on the WCD. Formed in 1975, the land was handed over to the residents by the Uitvlugt estate in February 1977. Since then it still has not received piped water, sewerage or electricity. Undoubtedly the racial composition of the village helps to explain why the community is one of the poorest squatting settlements in the area. After the PPP came back into power (in 1992) the settlement residents secured an undertaking from the Ministry of Housing that the regularisation of plots would commence. Problems have since arisen because residents cannot afford to pay for title for their land, the fee for which has risen steadily and by 1996 was already \$G65,000.
- 7 Nobody in the village had land for subsistence farming at Uitvlugt estate. Residents

- had to purchase land at Parika, ten miles west of the village, and in 1997 the few remaining villagers who still had land there sold their (unprofitable) holdings.
- 8 Personnel at Uitvlugt estimate the estate is the sole provider of cash for 80 per cent of people within a five-mile radius; employing between 2,000 and 2,300 workers and with a multiplier effect of ten, about 20,000–23,000 persons are kept employed (Ayube 1993; Charles 1993). Of the 100 women in the village survey 81 had husbands or lived in a household with a male relative; of these 72 were employed, 52 of whom worked at Uitvlugt estate in various capacities, mostly as labourers.
 - 9 A review of income of the women's partners reveals that the average weekly wage of those at Uitvlugt (out of crop) was \$G1,500–2,000 with only 17 men earning above \$G2,000, and only four earning over \$G3,000. Average earnings were \$G2,500–2,800 in crop. Although wages, in 1997, had risen to \$G7–8,000 in crop for canecutters (the highest-paid fieldworkers) the increase in the cost of living has, to a large degree, cancelled out the increase.
 - 10 Booker Tate argued that it could only halt the precipitous rate of attrition of labour in the industry through offering higher wages. In the 1980s the spiralling cost of living and the below-subsistence-level wages paid had led to a large exodus of labour from the industry. Between 1979 and 1989 Guysuco had lost over 80 per cent of its trained apprentices (Glasford 1994), but by 1993 Booker Tate had reduced this rate to 16 per cent (Thomas 1995a).
 - 11 Prior to 1990 the workforce was approximately 14–15,000, by 1993 it had risen to 25,000 (approximately 3,000 of whom are women) (Haniff n.d.).
 - 12 In October 1990 there was a 50 per cent increase in wages, in March 1991 another 75 per cent and in October 1991 a 35 per cent increase. In March 1992 there was another 22 per cent increase and a reduction in the working week from 44 to 40 hours. Since August 1992 workers have been paid time-and-a-half for working on Saturday and double time for Sundays. In August 1993 there was another 21 per cent increase (retroactive to 1 March 1993) as well as a production incentive. Regulatory practices are also now entering into an industrial model. Since the mid-1980s workers qualify for work in the out-of-crop season if they work 80 per cent of their time in the crop season and since 1993 the weeding gang has no longer had to negotiate its wages on a daily basis (Gopaul 1993; Hilary 1993).
 - 13 Thomas (1995b:14) defines the systemically poor as those who are born poor 'mainly because of the manner of their insertion into the system of production and asset ownership'. They are distinguished from the structurally poor who are those who have become poor during a period of economic decline.
 - 14 Although not directly asked which party they voted for, a number of questions elicited the party to which they gave support. When conflicts did arise they were most usually over issues of property, such as people 'selling' land to which they had no legal title and disputes among family members over who will inherit the home of a deceased parent.
 - 15 Miller (1994) found tremendous dynamism among Indo-Trinidadians in relation to kinship practices; arranged marriages and the use of Hindi terminology, for example, had virtually disappeared, although he stresses that '[d]espite this considerable dynamism in actual kinship practices among the Indian community there remains an ideology about family which is pervasive and resilient against these transformations...the reification of the concept 'family' itself...has become central to the distinctive ethnicity of being Indian' (Miller 1994:141; see also Chapter Five). He attributes the acceleration of this rapid change among Indo-Trinidadians to the oil boom (Miller 1994:276).
 - 16 The housewifisation of Indo-Guyanese women who left the sugar industry in the 1950s and 1960s and their overriding identities as mothers may also militate against

- engaging in employment that for so many older women had led to miscarriages. The oldest woman interviewed, aged seventy-six, had worked in the cane fields from the age of seventeen to forty. During that time '*me clean trench, me chop grass, me cut cane, me plant cane, me mould cane*' (Subagai 1993). The physically arduous nature of the work took its toll on her health. During that period she had a total of fourteen miscarriages and stillbirths. Her only live birth was at the age of forty when she started less physically demanding work in the estate compound (where she continued until the age of seventy).
- 17 In the early 1950s migration was predominantly to Great Britain until the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Bill restricted entry and people turned to North America instead, where the 1965 United States Immigration and Nationality Act eased entry. For histories of Caribbean migration see Thomas-Hope 1991; Gmelch 1992.
 - 18 For many migrants, their illegal status and lack of educational qualifications mean they can work only in a narrow range of jobs and while they may constitute a cheap labour force it is one that can be accessed by only a small range of employers.
 - 19 In part this is attributable to the low standard of teaching in many schools, as the best-qualified teachers left to teach overseas or engage in other, better-paid activities. In addition, the level of poverty in which the children live militates against study at home (where the combination of household chores and lack of electricity prohibit a prolonged study time).
 - 20 The radio was listened to every day. Although it served as a medium for the transmission of information, such as the news, items on health care, death notices, children's education programmes and sometimes items on women's issues, most commonly it was the sound of music (pop, reggae, soca, dub, chutney) that blasted out of it.
 - 21 Many of these programmes are pirated and the viewer has no control over when they start, finish or are interrupted.
 - 22 Moreover, the cost of travelling for many is prohibitive. In the local area bicycles are a preferred mode of transportation by both men and women (over 60 per cent of households in the survey owned a bicycle).
 - 23 See Miller (1994:247–55) for an extended account of the soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*, in Trinidad, which enjoys the same high level of popularity as in Guyana. Miller attributes the programme's success to the outlet it provides for gossip about the characters' behaviour and the subsequent realism the programme gives to the viewers' lives.
 - 24 In 1996 Susan's dilemma was resolved; the fiancé of Susan's daughter returned to Guyana, unable to make it financially in the United States.
 - 25 Backtrack implies illegal immigration with the aid of forged documents and arranged passages and ports of entry.
 - 26 There are limits to these changes. Only at the risk of disinheritance do kinfolk step too far outside the networks of reciprocity that sustain them. Rather than revolt against their position in the household's hierarchy, they attempt to enhance their status within it, and put themselves in a situation whereby they are less subject to the demands and impositions of family and kin (see also Weyland 1993).
 - 27 Miller (1994) argues that Indo-Trinidadian women's association with asexuality and an identity subsumed within the family is challenged when they leave home to marry. At this point they become associated with sexuality and assume an individuality that can no longer be incorporated solely within the family. In other words, they assume the essential characteristics of an Afro-Trinidadian woman. Hence the 'considerable concern over the formation of relationships by females, making this a cause of intra-family trauma and strife second only to inheritance disputes' (Miller 1994:199). This idiom, also evident in Guyana—of potential sexual

relations between black males and Indian daughters—is a specific example of the general principle of the proper relationship between blood and marriage; black male sexuality poses a threat to the production of Indianness and of being Indian.

- 28 It is expected that there will be attrition of labour in the median term (by natural wastage); increasing aversion to working in the sugar industry by women and youth; uncertainty of preferential pricing agreements; the degree of freedom from political interference; and whether there is a sustainable resolution of the ‘historical difficulties produced by the links between sugar production (slavery, indentured plantation labour and colonial production) and the wider society’ (Thomas 1995a:45).

GENDER AND SEXUALITY AMONG AFRO-GUYANESE IN LINDEN

Introduction

In our final case-study we return to an urban setting, in order to explore the meanings working-class Afro-Guyanese men and women in Linden, the country's only industrial town, attach to the gendered and sexualised dimensions of each other's identities.¹ The dualist conceptual frameworks that Caribbean studies of femininity and masculinity have spawned (most notably Wilson's (1973) core binary of reputation and respectability),² in placing individuals firmly in one camp or another, overlook the often contradictory and competing qualities of such dualisms and the individuals they purport to describe. More recently Miller's (1994) model of transcendence and transience in Trinidad and Williams's (1991) focus on the ideological precepts of egalitarianism and hierarchy in Guyana, whilst replicating the dualist divide, recognise that values may be simultaneously embraced or rejected by women and men (although they emphasise their differing implications for them). This nascent Caribbean literature (see also Barrow 1986; Beckles 1996; Lewis 1996; Yelvington 1993b; Sampath 1993) along with recent studies from Latin America (see, for example, French and James 1997; Gutmann 1996; Lancaster 1992), is recognisant of the extent to which men and women embody tensions between different types of gendered identities.³ Transformations in the expressions of masculinity and femininity over generations or changes by an individual over the course of his or her life cycle, preclude the notion of ascribing to these identities any unitary meaning (Gutmann 1996). Rather, there is a matrix of 'acceptable and unacceptable masculine [and feminine] behaviours and attitudes' from which men and women both dissent and acquiesce (Sampath 1993:249).

Starting from the premises, then, that masculinities and femininities are not given but historically produced via struggle and consent, and are also in flux today, we explore the practices of the Demba bauxite company in its attempts to develop hegemonic control over constructions of working-class domesticity. Focus then turns to the working-class community itself. Current articulations of gender among and between working-class Afro-Guyanese men and women, in terms of the norms and practices attached to masculinity and femininity,

reveal the continuing salience of (hetero)sexuality to their construction.⁴ We commence, however, by turning our attention to the construction of subordinated racialised masculinities among Afro-Guyanese.⁵

'He got to be a tough man in de street': the construction of masculinities

The process of Afro-Guyanese men's subordination began in the Anglo-European colonial era under slavery. In European nationalist ideologies the black male slave was characterised as shiftless and lazy, '...warning of what the future might hold if society relaxed its controls and abandoned its quest for respectability' (Mosse 1985, quoted in Williams 1996c:9). Documenting conditions under slavery, Hilary Beckles (1996:4) describes how

...the black male was denied what was familiar, and his masculine impulses targeted by surveillance systems that directed the nature of everyday life. Black masculinities, then, were politicised within the context of white patriarchal ideological representations. In social relations, the black male and his offspring were fed, clothed and sheltered by white men whose hegemonic ideology determined that being 'kept' and 'kept down' were symbolic of submissive inferiority, and gendered feminisation.

That the colonised subordination of black men's masculinities took place through their feminisation begs the question of how they have attempted to redefine their masculinity in the contemporary period, while still demonstrating their sense of self in a class-stratified and racialised society. As Williams succinctly states, 'How are men to be African while providing regular support for a wife and children when such activities ideologically are deemed "White", "Indian", or any ethnicity other than African...?' (1996c:150). She maintains Guyanese men have asserted their identities by claiming characteristics that set them apart from differently racialised men. Afro-Guyanese men, for example, claim Indo-Guyanese are obsessed with controlling wealth and do not know how to 'live good' with their neighbours. Conversely, Indo-Guyanese stereotypically view Afro-Guyanese men as racially inferior, living for the moment and incapable of controlling the sexuality of Afro-Guyanese women. These racialised stereotypes have been discursively drawn upon by both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese to assert their positioning in the socio-economic hierarchy. In Afro-Guyanese men's attempts to place 'Afro-Guyaneness' at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of racialised groups' struggle for political and economic resources, '...masculinity must not be equated with "becoming a slave" or to the frequently used term "living the life of a coolie", a reference to one who has adopted an "East Indian work ethic"'(Williams 1996c:147). Indo-Guyanese men may live to work, but Afro-Guyanese men work to live (see Williams 1996c:145).

The reality of Afro-Guyanese men's lives highlights the disjuncture between these stereotypes and their engagement in work. Employment does occupy a significant space in the contemporary Afro-Guyanese masculine imaginary, but it is currently a space in flux. Lewis (1996) claims (Afro-) Caribbean men are currently facing two interrelated crises: an economic crisis engendered by global restructuring, experienced by Afro-Guyanese men in Linden through the impact of SAPs in the bauxite industry and large-scale retrenchments, and a related crisis in which gender roles are dislocated within civil society:

unemployment coupled with bleak prospects of future work, dwindling chances of realising the goal of home ownership for example, and a growing recognition of one's powerlessness to control one's own social reproduction...have tended to dislocate familiar gender roles for men, leaving them groping for ways to traverse this new territory.

(Lewis 1996:9)

Lack of the breadwinner's role has obvious repercussions on male-female interactions; having control over a woman and her labour in the household, to a large degree, depends on a man's ability to 'pay his way'. Miller (1994:173) claims that in Trinidad the giving of money and sex are the primary defining acts of a relationship. Without one, the other may be withdrawn. And lack of sexual contact with a woman can lead to claims of homosexuality, a hugely stigmatised sexual identity.⁶ Indeed, Guyanese homosexuals are commonly referred to as 'anti-men'.⁷ If, as Lancaster (1992:273) asserts, '...a structure, a system of practice, is most readily defined not by what is central to it but by what is apparently marginal to it', then heterosexuality would appear to be another key defining feature of the Afro-Guyanese masculine imaginary. And neither is heterosexuality only about how men relate to women, it also structures power relations between men. Among differently racialised men, for example, Afro-Caribbean men, with their supposed unbridled sexuality and lust for other men's women, have the ability to threaten the 'purity' of all other ethnic groups and usurp their place in the national imaginary (Williams 1996c: 145-8; Miller 1994:199-200).

As Brana Shute (1979) has argued, Caribbean masculinities are privileged in public places that are sites of male socialisation. In these spaces masculinities are continually reinforced to prevent men from being stigmatised as what they are not, i.e. anti-men. Liming, the occupation of public space usually centred around recreational drinking, allows 'true' Afro-Guyanese men to develop their masculine reputations and keep on showing women, other men and themselves that they are masculine. And it is through his reputation that a man '... achieves a place in the world of others where he is both an equal and unique person' (Wilson 1973:150). Men's visibility in the lime makes clear they are not spending all their time working, neither are they in the home under a

woman's thumb. Liming not only establishes their independence from women and difference from Indo-Guyanese men, but also confirms them as men who have money to spend (with and on other men) and provides a space in which they can relate their sexual adventures to other men, thereby corroborating their (hetero)sexuality and verifying 'the lime [as] a liminal space for Caribbean men' (Lewis 1996:17).⁸

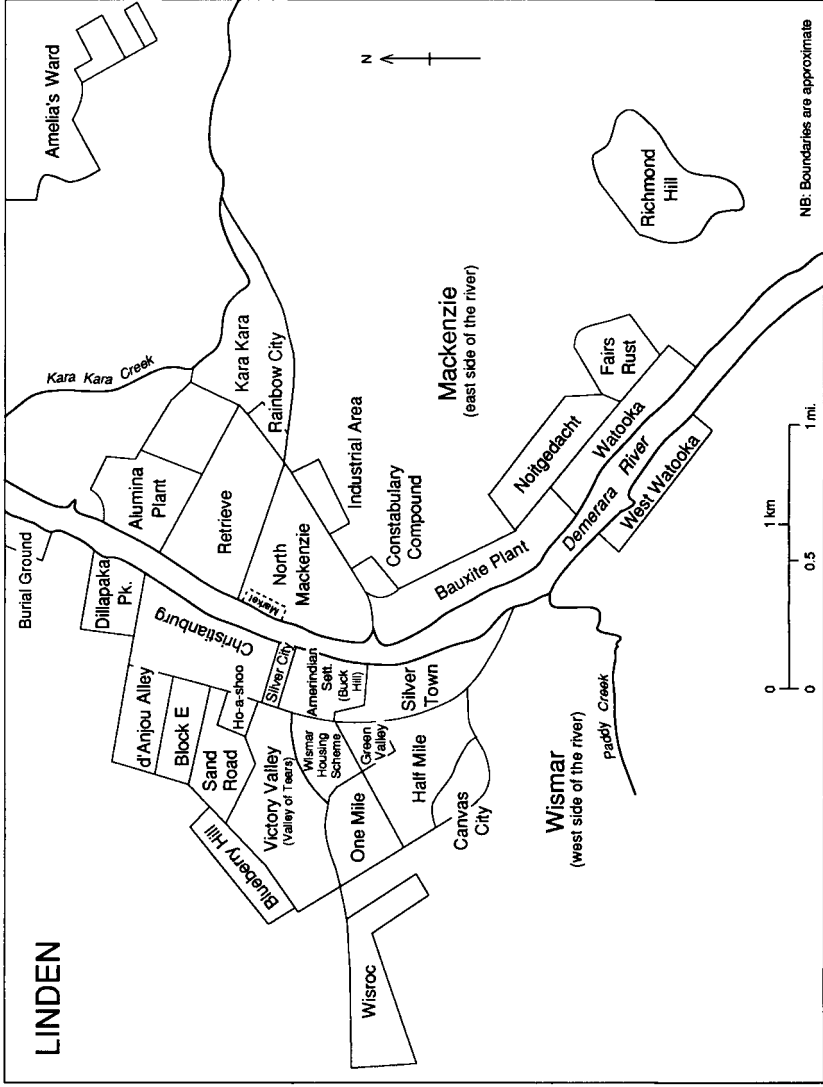
The emergence of Linden

Linden, predominantly a one-industry town, epitomises the frontier settlement; a raw, red gash on the landscape, surrounded by scrub and savannah, it is separated by a distance of 100 kilometres from Georgetown, and has the distinction of being the only urban settlement not to be located on the coastal belt (Peake 1998). Geographically the town is split in two by the Demerara River, with Wismar/Christianburg to the west and Mackenzie to the east (see Map 7.1). Originally known as Cockatara it was renamed Mackenzie after the American engineer who scoured the area in 1913 in search of bauxite deposits (St. Pierre 1973).⁹ For over half a century the MNC of Alcan and its local subsidiary, the Demerara Bauxite Mining Company (Demba), dictated the development of the settlement and its surroundings. At a time when Indo-Guyanese were still largely engaged in indentured labour on the coast and Afro-Guyanese were migrating to urban centres, the latter gained a foothold in the logging industry in the area, later facilitating their entry into the bauxite industry. Afro-Guyanese dominance was further reinforced following the racialised disturbances of the early 1960s that led to Indo-Guyanese workers leaving the town. Today, 94 per cent of the population are Afro-Guyanese or mixed.

The town grew by its incorporation into a classic process of underdevelopment, through the exploitation of the local natural resources of gold, timber and bauxite. Production of bauxite took place on only a small scale until the mid-1940s when Mackenzie emerged as a foreign-enclave bauxite mining centre. In the 1950s and 60s, with economic development initiatives favouring the exploitation of natural resources by foreign capital, the production of bauxite by Demba flourished. At Independence, in 1966, it was the country's largest export earner, giving it an importance that went beyond the number of workers it employed. As a result, by 1970 Linden had developed from being a company town to the second-largest urban settlement with a population in 1991 of over 30,000 (see Table 7.1).¹⁰ Although it also serves as the administrative centre of Region Ten, bauxite-mining continues to be the mainstay of the town's economy, as well as a major dimension of the Guyanese economy.

The town today has all the services and facilities needed for the functioning of everyday life, but as one woman resident stated, all is not well in Linden:

Linden has a number of problems, some of which stem from the bauxite industry experiencing a downturn and retrenching a lot of people. It also has some problems that arise from poverty in general.



Map 7.1 Linden

For example, Linden has the highest percentage of people with AIDS in the country. Unemployment is the worst problem in Linden. AIDS is a growing problem. So are drugs—cocaine and ganja.

(Jenny, age forty)

Community infrastructure is in an abysmally poor state, squatting areas are increasing in size, and the building of the town on the river banks has contributed to severe erosion of land, especially in Wismar, while there are serious environmental and health problems as a result of the bauxite that covers the land in a film of fine red dust. Relations between Linmine (which superseded the nationalised industry, Guymine) and the community are increasingly strained.¹¹ Linmine has significantly reduced its role in the community's upkeep, although it is still by far the town's largest employer.¹² As a result of retrenchments and the reduction or elimination of subsidies for the town's social infrastructure by Linmine, the level of hardship faced by working-class households has, intensified enormously as they have been forced to meet a greater share of the cost of the community's survival. Linmine is obviously in crisis, operating well below capacity and stymied by a range of factors, but its closure would decimate the Linden community. Despite the retrenchments approximately 3,000 households (i.e. approximately 15,000 people) depend primarily on Linmine for their survival, as do many others through its multiplier effects.

Table 7.1 Population growth in the Upper Demerara River (UDR),^a 1891–1991, from natural increase and migration.

Year	Population				Born in UDR		Born elsewhere ^b	
	Male no.	Female no.	%	Total no.	no.	%	no.	%
1891 ^c	4,275	2,933	41	7,208	— ^d	—	—	—
1911	4,669	3,432	42	8,101	—	—	—	—
1921	5,566	3,777	40	9,343	—	—	—	—
1931	4,627	3,357	42	7,984	—	—	—	—
1946	5,303	3,761	42	9,064	5,303	59	3,761	41
1960	9,956	8,848	47	18,804	11,128	59	7,666	41
1970	14,245	13,549	49	27,839	15,354	55	12,485	45
1981	18,691	17,987	49	36,678	20,141	55	16,205	45
1991 ^e	19,349	19,922	51	39,271	—	—	—	—

Sources: Census Reports; HIES 1992

Notes:

^a The vast majority of the population in the UDR area live in Linden. For sake of comparison the UDR is used because it is referenced in the majority of censuses whereas Linden is referenced only from 1960

^b Includes those born overseas

^c There is no record of a settlement in the UDR area before this time

^d Figures unavailable

^e Figures for 1991 are for Region Ten

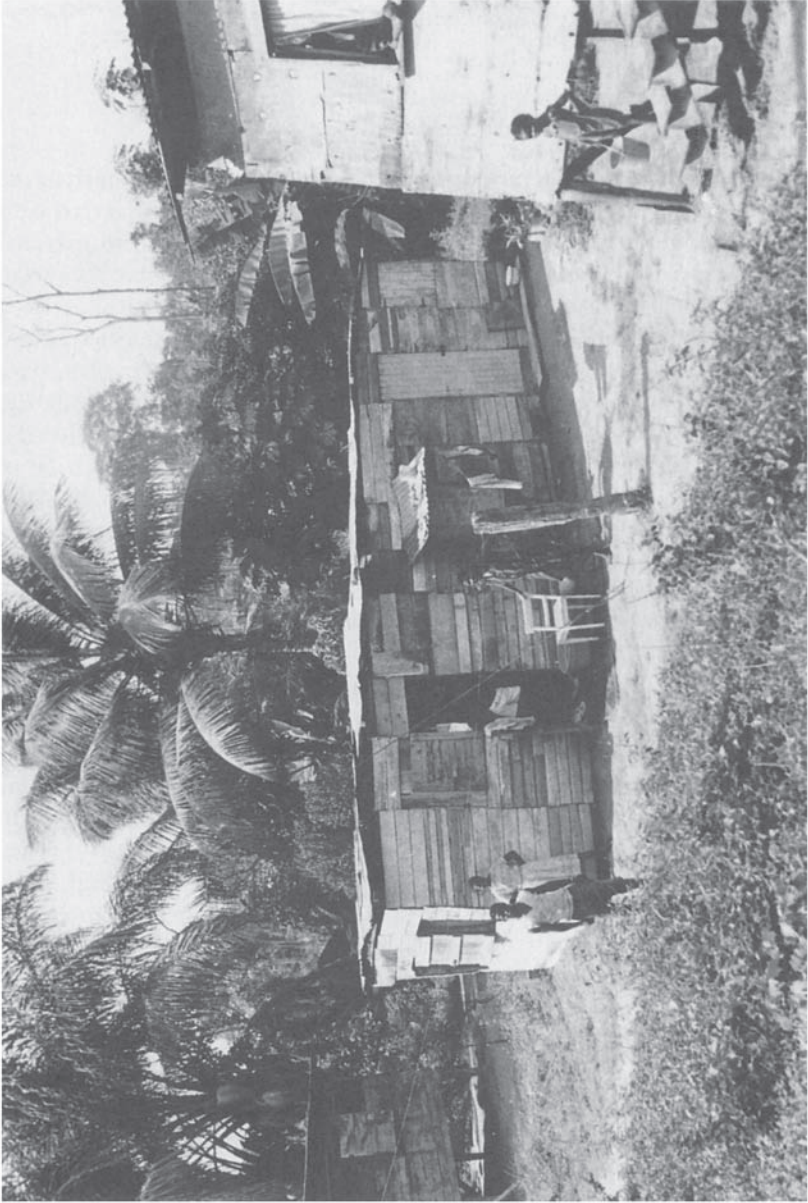


Figure 7.1 Squatters in Linden

But Linden's current economic woes paint a far different picture from the time when the town was the property of Demba.

Demba's role in the construction of masculinity and femininity

Migration to the Upper Demerara River, where Linden is located, began in the early twentieth century. The town continued to grow through the accretion of generations of migrants, both from within the country and from external migration. Many of the early migrants came from rural areas where they were engaged in seasonal work in agriculture or petty trade. Hence their transience, a feature that was to define their proletarianisation, was well established before they arrived in Linden. Whatever their pathway for arriving in Linden, men have remained dominant in these flows. Yet Table 7.1 shows that while the population was predominantly male in the first half of the century, reflecting the labour opportunities we mentioned in Chapter Three, the proportion of women was still substantial. Women travelled to Linden with their male partners or independently to take advantage of the spin-off economic opportunities provided by the mines. They were employed in the largely informal service economy as domestic servants, seamstresses, market vendors, washerwomen and shop assistants. Still others worked in bars or brothels or started their own businesses. Demba, however, afforded minimal opportunities for women, employing them primarily as domestic workers and office staff.

Although mining commenced in 1917 Demba did not work its considerable concessions on any large-scale basis until the early 1940s when war-driven demand for bauxite led to employment of over 6,000 men (Shahabuddeen 1981). The prevailing national ideology of anti-colonialism as well as the critical mass and ethnic homogeneity among workers reinforced class conflict against the company and its white, expatriate management (although after nationalisation in 1971 it was the Guyanese Government who constituted the management).¹³ Colonially imposed legislation during the Second World War led to increasing industrial unrest. Large-scale (seasonal) retrenchments resulted in a series of stoppages culminating in the 1947 strike in which workers successfully won the right to establish a union. By the late 1940s dissatisfaction had spilled out from managerial practices in the workplace to living conditions in the community. As Shahabuddeen (1981:122) remarked, Demba 'had created a company town of a markedly authoritarian and colonial type'. Indeed, the strong symbiotic relationship between the company and the community has been likened to that of the plantation and its labour force (St Pierre 1973; Quamina 1987). Although workers fought against the autocratic nature of the company, both in the workplace and the community, the company's leverage was such that it effectively managed to out-manoeuvre them.¹⁴ Owing to the practice of many workers abandoning the town on weekends there was insufficient anchorage in the community to combat its patronage.

The company maintained its authoritarian rule through the uneven development of the physical fabric of the community and by controlling the movement of its members. In building (a minimum of) housing for its employees Demba created a rigid apartheid system in the community in which Afro-Guyanese employees were residentially segregated from white expatriate employees, paralleling the hierarchy of management and employees in the company.¹⁵ A pass system also restricted the movement of Afro-Guyanese workers in the town while their homes could be searched and tenancies terminated without notice (St. Pierre 1973). Draconian laws were also put in place to ensure that the supply of labour remained sufficient; all miners were prevented from owning land or property effectively precluding them from establishing their own businesses or engaging in other work. In the mid-1950s when levels of residential overcrowding had reached unbearable levels, social and private life was (literally) policed by Demba, the company establishing its own security force based in the Constabulary Compound in Mackenzie (see Map 7.1) to control its workers (Quamina 1987).

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s Demba managed to quell strikes and efforts to establish unions but events leading up to the 1947 strike revealed the workforce to comprise militant workers with high turnover levels. The Company, realising its need for a stable, disciplined workforce in order to increase production and supply its war-driven markets, started to adopt a more paternalistic approach in its efforts to transform a transient (but unionised) labour force into a more permanent and malleable one. From the late 1940s onwards, in negotiations reached with the union, Demba not only agreed to provide more houses (although ceasing the building of Bachelors' Quarters) but also bonuses and higher wages than were paid in other industries elsewhere in the country. Workers were provided with social and recreational facilities including health clinics and a hospital, churches, shops, schools, a public library, social and sports clubs and a cinema.¹⁶ The company also provided free services such as garbage collection, home maintenance and electricity. Bauxite workers were seen as privileged employees; paid (relatively) high wages and with a number of social welfare benefits, they were the envy of other workers in the colony.

But the advantages accruing to workers came with a price attached, with Demba playing a similar role to colonial overseers in attempting to fix and limit the parameters of workers' identities.¹⁷ Demba's attempts to restrict Afro-Guyanese men's identities, while proving an effective strategy for enabling a small white élite to live and work among a substantial black population, were contested by workers. A primary assumption underlying the company's provision of social welfare was that men living with their wives and families would engage less in attending brothels, gambling, drinking and other activities that (supposedly) affected productivity (Quamina 1987). Workers' dependence on their wages to maintain their families was also assumed to lead to a less strikeprone, more regularised, long-term labour force (see also Miller Klubock

1997; Nash 1979). But once married quarters were established, rather than bringing discipline to the workforce, there was an increase in militancy, expressed through fights, wildcat stoppages and strikes. Disputes increasingly came to encompass issues of social reproduction. Attempts by Demba to impose a new ideology of domesticity, placing men as responsible heads of households who had to provide for their families, not only legitimised men's demands for higher wages, it also led to miners' wives and partners participating in stoppages over the increase in cost of living and food shortages.¹⁸

But while male workers exhibited an antagonistic attitude to management and company policy they did have access to a work environment that promoted aspects of masculinity they willingly emulated, such as emphasizing strength, skill and wage earning. The same was hardly true for their partners who, in their workplace, i.e. the home, were encouraged to adopt the characteristics of bourgeois respectability. In their efforts to produce a disciplined and productive labour force, Demba also promoted certain normative images of women's roles. In keeping with the domestication of women in North America in the 1950s, women associated with men working at Linmine had their social roles sharply delineated from their partners'. The company's newspaper (the only one circulated in town), *The Mackenzie Miner*; had a regular Women's Page in which women were exhorted to be good wives. Articles on home decorating, recipes, sewing tips, wedding photographs and reports of baby shows and the Mackenzie Housewives Co-op Thrift Society, all promoted women's association with the domestic sphere. The ability of Demba to fix the parameters of women's identities was further cemented by its monopoly of the formal sector, effectively circumscribing women's access to waged employment.

Indeed, the company did not employ miners' wives and partners; they were idealized as orderly and efficient housewives who had nothing to do (except individually deal with such social problems as male alcoholism, infidelity, domestic violence and desertion: see also Weinstein 1997). It was women's role to stretch the family budget, to keep the family together and create a home environment conducive to men wanting to stay at home. While not all women endorsed such notions of domestic femininity wholeheartedly, the company's concern with women's social responsibilities, despite its ideological under-pinnings, held a number of attractions for working-class women. The lack of jobs in the formal sector and limited remunerative opportunities in the informal sector left marriage as the most viable option available for women to increase their social status in the community,¹⁹ and while their economic dependence on men necessitated women's alignment with men against the company in efforts to secure higher wages, at other times women sided with the company to make sure men did not stray from their familial duties to provide for their wives and children. Housewives had access to credit at company stores while both married women and common-law wives could collect affiliation dues from delinquent husbands simply by reporting the case to the company's Payroll Department (Quamina 1987).

Company police would also periodically raid the Bachelors' Quarters to discourage visits by prostitutes and other single women, serving to impose a transgressive quality on women's sexuality outside the family. These regulations allowed married women to draw on the discursive resource of the ideology of domesticity to give themselves a social legitimacy and rights and privileges that single women outside the remit of Demba's patronage were denied.

But family life was harsh for women. As late as the 1960s there was still a huge exodus of workers on weekends. Men were often absent, workers had constant fears about losing their jobs, alcoholism was rife and relations between men and women were characterised by violence and instability (Quamina 1987). Men's economic power also gave them social and sexual freedoms denied to women. While company regulations attempted to restrict men's sexual possibilities they were only partially successful in moulding men into model heads of household. Men held back wages from their partners and took refuge in the public places—the bars, union halls and social clubs—denied to women. Not only did men's work and leisure take place in masculinised spaces that were conducive to the formation of a fraternity which excluded women, but also the new ideology of domesticity worked to reinforce men's control over women's labour and sexual exclusivity. That company regimes of discipline, under the guise of domesticating male workers and protecting (married) women's honour, required the policing of both men's and women's sexuality indicates that the construction of a working class in Linden was not simply a process of attracting male labour to work in a highly masculinised industry. It also involved attempts to erase masculine agency (although Demba's attempts were far more successful in relation to class and 'race' than sexuality) and to fix women's identities in the realm of domesticity.²⁰ And as men and women both supported and contested the company's regime of domesticity, both the workplace and the community were being reshaped, reconfiguring the terrain on which class struggles were waged.

The construction of masculinity and femininity in the Afro-Guyanese working class

Demba's identification of working-class women with domesticity was made possible, in large part, by the manner in which management and male workers, drawing on shared patriarchal values, could both realize (different) benefits from promoting strong negative associations between women and waged work. Women who worked did so because they had no man to provide for them, giving them a low social status in the community, and while they earned only menial-level wages they simultaneously threatened the image of men as breadwinners. Furthermore, in occupations in which men were present, they opened themselves up to sexual abuse. Regardless, many single, unattached women, since their arrival in Linden, had been continuously engaged in employment in the informal sector. From 1971, with the nationalization of Demba, jobs were

made available to women in the mining industry, mostly still as secretaries and office workers, but also as manual workers (the company's Trade School was made co-educational). In the 1970s white-collar employment also opened up in other industries, such as construction and local government, that now started to develop in the area, allowing married women to gradually enter the labour force. In the mid-1980s women's entry into waged work accelerated with the economic crisis. By the early 1990s most of Linmine's subsidies no longer existed and wages could not keep in line with the increase in the cost of living, resulting in the majority of Linden's population living below the poverty line (Peake 1998). Within this context of economic immiseration what ruptures and continuities are visible in the ways sexuality and gender have come to be articulated and contested? What expectations about appropriate behaviour for themselves and the opposite sex do men and women now have? And how are gendered norms and practices being reconciled in a situation whereby women are increasingly being forced to join the labour force at a rate which exceeds that previously known in the community?

Norms of femininity and masculinity

Responses to such broad structural changes as those outlined above are articulated through a dialectic of practices and norms regarding appropriate behaviour. Norms of what constitutes success are themselves contingent and mediated by social and economic conditions; they are discursive resources that transform, and themselves are transformed by, the behavioural practices they represent. Moreover, given that norms comprise values, a matrix of norms can exist, with the meanings attached to them being contingent, contextual and even contradictory. We turn now to consider the values to which working-class Afro-Guyanese men and women currently ascribe.

As we noted in Chapter Five, Williams (1996c) claims appropriate modes of class behaviour require a balance between egalitarian ('living good' with one's neighbours) and hierarchical (increasing access to material resources) values and that these are blended in men and women in a way that is consistent with, and representative of, their racialised identities. Williams (1996b:133) refers to the construction of working-class Afro-Guyanese femininity (partially) in terms of the egalitarian precepts of 'co-operation, reciprocity and sociability'. Central to these ideals is the notion of avoiding 'eye-pass', an insult to one's social equals that could take the form of showing insufficient deference towards a person or demanding unwarranted deference from others (see Jayawardena 1962). Numerous women in the survey made reference to the efforts of their mothers, regardless of how poor they were, to raise them 'good', as epitomised in the common phrase '*She try wid me, she really try*'. They decried what they saw as the errant behaviour of the younger generation; failure to address adults with their respective titles of 'uncle' or 'aunty' could be interpreted as eye-pass and lay the basis for accusations of not being a good mother. Great emphasis was therefore placed on the importance of good manners in children, as one woman recounted:

As I grow as a child my parents were very strict. They taught me to be discipline and have respect for people and elders, especially elders and persons around the community. My mother was a full-time housewife and my father use to work at the bauxite company as a mechanic...I learnt a lot of things from my parents, especially my mother. She taught me how to relate to others, how we share love to others, how to take care of the young ones.

(Marilyn, age thirty-six)

Being a good mother, illustrated through a woman's ability to raise well-behaved children, was a crucial dimension of her ability not only to maintain cordial relations within the community but also to achieve social standing and thereby illustrate a desire to move on in the world (see also Williams 1996c). Motherhood was also seen as personally rewarding, the rite of passage into adulthood, although the status of mothers in the community varied according to the relations they had with their 'child father'. Successful working-class Afro-Guyanese women attempted to raise their children in a middle-class-oriented home and ideally this meant having a husband present. Marriage was also emphasised by (but not strongly correlated with membership in) evangelical varieties of religious devotion, to which the majority of women in the survey professed belonging. Great stress was laid on the respectability of marriage, although the small number of married women (lower than both Albouystown and Meten Meer Zorg East) is indicative of the large gap between the desirable and the feasible. Economic decline has led to many men migrating—Table 7.1 reveals the high level of migrants among the town's residents—and those who remained had few opportunities to make sufficient money to support a married partner. Still, and especially given the marital status of the majority of their older female relatives, marriage was the norm to which most women aspired although this varied with geographical location in the town:

You ain' marry...to me, is a disadvantage for a woman right. Because most times people tek dey eyes an' pass you. Certain communities, certain places yuh could live. Sometimes it could be a norm, people would overlook certain tings, but den when yuh live in another area people look down on yuh.

(Jenny, age thirty-nine)

Conflicting values around marriage were also evident among women in different stages of the life cycle. As in Albouystown, claims for equal status with married women were made by older women (from their late thirties onwards) in long-term 'live home' relationships for which they could claim the same father for all their children. Yet younger women (in their twenties) who were commonly involved in visiting relations, expressed desires to move on to more respectable unions as they became older. As one young woman with a small

child, involved in an affair with a married man, stressed: *'I want to get marry even if I get old and got to hop down the aisle.'*

The differing values expressed in women's attitudes about the legal status of their union were replicated in their expectations of marriage. For younger women there was a strong tendency to look to involvement with men as the only way to solve their financial problems and gain upward mobility. While these women also desired companionship from a marriage this was a spin-off that would result from the financial security and higher standard of living they expected marriage to provide: *'Yuh see, when yuh get married yuh does move up to standard wid everything. I expecting betterment, change of lifestyle yuh know, especially dis jealousy ting.'* For older women the emphasis on being married was more on egalitarian values such as the respectability it brought as well as the commitment it implied by each partner to the other. Even so these women were concerned to maintain their independence from male domination (also see Williams 1996c and Chapter Five), and were less likely than younger women to look to men for their emotional and financial welfare:

Right now every woman mekkin' dey own security and dey just have a man there assisting. Well for me now marriage is just for companionship, because if yuh want talk about security yuh know like I would got to get dat security [employment] as a matter of fact.
(Patsy, age forty)

As Patsy indicates, women were increasingly being forced into securing 'betterment', i.e. a degree of financial autonomy and material improvement in their lives, by working. Betterment for women no longer depended on having an upwardly mobile husband working at Linmine or educating their daughters so they could acquire white-collar jobs. By neither men nor women were women's income-generating activities rationalised as being just a matter of helping out. The large-scale retrenchments of male workers and the concomitant recognition of women's employment as a matter of economic necessity, and a history and local context in which some women have always worked, expanded understandings of femininity (albeit unevenly) to encompass women as workers or housewives; as among Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown, employment status was irrelevant to the level of success a woman could expect to achieve.

In addition to motherhood and a desire for 'betterment', women's ability to acquire a man was a further hallmark of the successful woman. This norm was expressed through the axiom that women should have a man (at whatever cost), the ultimate degradation in such a patriarchal community being to live without sexual contact with a man (see also Miller 1994:176). Sexual activity was prominent in women's conceptions of themselves. Sex was considered a regular act that should be of satisfaction to both partners and women were familiar with a wide range of tonics (Steel Drops) and bush remedies (Iron Wood, Gully Root, White Lairy, Capadula Bark) to improve male and female sexual performance

(see Miller 1994:173, on Trinidad). Younger women expressed the belief that while they had a right to a social life, to entertainment, to meet with friends and to go out and have a good time, they had to have a man before they felt good about themselves. Having a man not only provided the opportunity to become a mother, and an adult, but also the expectation of financial support. These convictions gained expression in their recognition of themselves as active sexual subjects who took pleasure in heterosexual sex: *I enjoy sex. Maybe is because he does put me in de right mood, at least I usually get what I expect to get out of it,* Sexual satisfaction was also important to older women although this gained legitimate expression more through a culture of romance (such as being bought presents on Valentine's Day) or through the sanctity of a long-term relationship, as a forty-year-old mother of nine children explained: *If yuh have yuh husband financing the home and every ting, but den again he ent got that sexual thing towards yuh [and] den again he still lacking something.* While only a minority of women referred to sex as a marital duty, men's sexual access to women was considered a right and was only a question of putting a woman in the right mood. As one woman commented, women were also under pressure to keep their partner as mistresses, 'outside' women, were a well-established tradition:

Sex is a duty. [If he wants sex] well I will have to go because if I don't he got somebody else outside waiting and done ready. So you always got to be up to date at home. You always got to be up to date.

(Marsha, age thirty-seven)

If motherhood, material success and sexual gratification were signifiers of the successful Afro-Guyanese working-class woman, what were the gendered norms associated with masculinity? As with women, representations of the successful working-class Afro-Guyanese man varied over the life cycle of the individual male. Younger men (including those up to their mid-thirties or so) have to build up reputations, which they do by liming outside the home and relating to other men their 'acts of strength' (Wilson 1973), such as the fathering of children and engagement in hard work. Yet there is a tension here; too much time liming would characterise them as idle and unambitious. The need for reputation-building practices lessens as men pass through the life cycle, accumulating responsibilities and resources such as finances and support networks of ex-partners and children. Older men (over the age of forty or so) were characterised by a paternal masculinity that emphasised marriage, the fathering of children and control over any partners as well as obligation to family and community. These were expressed through displays of domesticity which for men was synonymous, not with any ability to do housework, but with control over their sexual passions and respect for women. Religious beliefs, particularly those of evangelical Christianity, had a strong influence, dictating how men should 'live good' with their neighbours: *The church teaches me how to be human and be loving to others,* and display respect for their partners: *It teaches me how women is to be treated as your equal.*

The status attached to fathers varied depending on the nature of the union they had with their partner, only marriage or 'living home' being suitable for a successful man. The relationship between fatherhood and a stable conjugal relationship however was not coterminous; rather it was the ability to materially succeed that was synonymous with settling down in a relationship. Younger men were much less likely to marry or be expected to marry. Yet in their beliefs in what a marriage meant to them both younger and older men painted a remarkably consistent picture. Not only did it mean taking life more seriously, being more constructive and taking on responsibility, it also provided a space for men to engage in relations based not on subordination but love and romance; fulfilment, understanding, respectability, having a loving wife and a happy family life being men's most commonly cited expectations. Men's attitudes to marriage and 'live home' relationships followed a similar pattern to women's. They formed two (equally sized) groups between those who stressed there was no difference between being married and living with someone and those who did. Rather a distinction was made between 'friending' (being in a visiting relationship) and living as man and wife. But even those men who were in 'friending' relationships and had children with a variety of women were morally obliged to provide financial support for them (see Williams 1996c).

The type of union in which a man was involved also determined the degree of control he could exercise over his partner's sexuality, another imperative in maintaining his manly reputation being to avoid the ultimate degradation of 'getting blow'. The symbolic violence attached to this term for adultery speaks to its emasculating function, hence men's keenness to prevent their partners from committing adultery by providing them with children and keeping them sexually satisfied (see also Miller 1994). Providing his partner with children was *the* signifier of masculinity in action; without children a man had no way of building up his reputation as a 'man of strength' with a proven ability to exercise his (hetero)sexuality.

Masculine ideals of 'betterment' were expressed through exalting the values of hard work and material advancement while avoiding any boasting about, or flaunting of, wealth (see also Brana Shute 1979:110; Williams 1996c:141). For men who had been retrenched from Linmine and were still unemployed, their inability to provide for their households was a major point of contention in their lives. The prominence of work to their conceptions of self was revealed in the words of one unemployed man: *'A new job would mean a great lot because as a family man it would change me and bring me back to a new man.'* As mineworkers they were proud of the arduous and dangerous nature of the work they had performed. It had given them a dignity and 'elevation' in the community of which they were well aware. The lack of stable employment in Linden had prevented many men from being able to improve their lot in life by settling down and owning their own house and land. A number of men made reference to the strain their inability to provide a steady income had placed on their relationships. Yet the responsibilities that access to money allowed men to

incur created a sense of obligation which, in turn 'almost automatically creates a corresponding sense of resistance' (Miller 1994:170).

This sense of resistance or independence was integral to conceptions of Afro-Guyanese working-class masculinity, expressed through freedom of movement and a degree of detachment from the ties of family. Despite being a household provider who took his responsibilities of marriage and parenthood seriously, an older man was also expected to maintain his status as head of the household who was not at risk of having his masculine agency erased by feminine wiles. Men's quest for independence also validated double standards in access to partners (neither marriage nor live-home relationships were synonymous with monogamy). Nearly half of the men, encompassing both young and old, believed they should be able to have more than one woman as long as they could financially afford to without neglecting their responsibilities: *'Yes, a man can have two women because the man is the backbone and as long as he give her everything she needs she should not worry.'*²¹ Although men with outside women were men to be admired and being a 'stud' was a sign of achievement, there was a tension here; not to show an interest in women effeminises men yet too much interest could be their downfall, leading to public quarrels, causing disharmony in the community and accusations of not 'living good' with their neighbours.

While many men did not conform to these predatory notions, their physical engagement with women was sufficient to deem them 'normal' men. Men, however, who demonstrated no interest in women were considered homosexuals; to not engage in sex was to transgress the hegemonic heterosexual construction of masculinity. Jacqui Alexander (1997), in her discussion of the popular rhetoric of homophobia in the Caribbean, makes the point that it is a discourse presented in religious and at times quasi-scientific terms, drawing heavily on biblical references and testimony to present God-given truths about moral character. Religious dictates were frequently employed by men in Linden to establish the limits of acceptable i.e. heterosexual behaviour: *'It's Anti-Christ'; 'Man is man and that is why Jesus beat them out of the temple'; 'The bible say man was made for woman.'* Moreover, the extremely popular religious idiom imposes on these dictates a mythical authority derived from time-honoured beliefs in the ultimate order of things: *'They are condemn from the beginning of creation'; 'They are sinning because God made Adam for Eve.'* While a biblical discourse cannot serve to answer questions on the origin of homosexuality—for some it was that these tendencies were inherited (*'The maker make them that way'*) and for others it was that they were born like that (*'They may have glandular problems'*) or that they were seduced by others—biblical immutability on the criminality of homosexuality did serve to foreclose all other discourses. Heterosexuality is thus represented as the only legitimate sexuality while other sexualities are unnatural and perverted.²² It is sex with the opposite sex that makes a man a man and a woman a woman, revealing the act of procreation to be central to the construction of masculinity and femininity.

Practices of femininity and masculinity

In practice, dimensions of masculinity and femininity were defined in opposition, yet also as complementary, to each other; gendered relations were realised through men and women both attempting to 'live good' and achieve 'betterment', yet also with men attempting to retain their patriarchal privileges and women their distance from such subordinating practices.²³ As a result, (and as we explicate in relation to Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women in Chapter Five) there was a wide range of behaviour displayed in individual relationships as well as contradictory behaviour by individuals as they attempted to live out their identities within the dialectic of norms and practices.

Although couples who had been together for a lengthy period were more likely to express satisfaction with their partners, relations between women and men were commonly represented as uneasy, uncertain and even dangerous, viewed as Miller (1994:176) notes with 'mutual apprehension and antagonism'. Men and women depicted each other in derogatory terms. Men saw women as attempting to tie them down to the home, denying them their freedom, tricking them out of their money and engaging in extra-marital affairs (see Barrow 1986 for similar findings among Barbadian men). Common complaints about men included their inability to attend to women's emotional needs, exhibiting a lack of concern for their family's welfare, presuming sex as a service, being devious, domineering, jealous and expecting constant domestic attention. Such stereotypical representations served the purpose of allowing their performers to gain the upper hand, of negotiating from a position of strength, while justifying their own actions in the face of what they identified as unreasonable and unacceptable behaviour by the opposite sex.

Intimate relations between women and men, especially younger men and women, were structured by men's deep suspicion and distrust of women, even misogyny. Relationships were virtually contracts based on sexual acts of exchange, whereby engagement in sex on a regular basis would oblige a man to make material contributions to a woman (see also Miller 1994:175-6; Williams 1991); gender relations had few other avenues of expression and were synonymous with the expression of a tightly circumscribed heterosexuality, the boundaries of conventional masculinities and femininities being policed by homophobia. The centrality of heterosexual relations to Afro-Guyanese working-class masculinity was expressed through men's fear of 'getting blow', while a lack of interest in men by women was interpreted as a woman's inability to succeed in life (infertility being regarded as a curse). Overwhelmingly, there was a feeling of disgust and abhorrence towards homosexuals and lesbians. Although not as frequently referred to in popular discourse in the same way as anti-men (perhaps because of their lower visibility), female same-sex activities attracted the same public opprobrium as those of 'anti-men'.²⁴ Lesbianism was rendered as a threat to domesticity and fertility, and in its impulse to corrupt, dangerous: *'They are unsafe.'* Lesbians

were seen as traitors to the 'race': *'They cannot multiply'*, and the reproduction of the nation: *'They have no place in the world.'* Most commonly both lesbians and homosexuals were castigated for having sex purely for their own pleasure, rather than for procreation and the reproduction of the ethnic group, and were described in terms of intense hatred, such as 'nastiness', 'wickedness', 'abnormality', being 'cursed' or 'sick': *'They should not be allowed to live.'*

Women's desire for motherhood and men's desire to father children were realised either through a stable relationship or through a series of friending relationships. In the latter a cyclical process frequently endured; because men could not (or would not) provide any or sufficient finance to cover their basic economic needs women went on to another man or sought employment and lived as female heads of households. Regardless of which option they adopted, the reality of women's subordinate economic status placed them in a precarious position. Although men claimed to feel a lot of pressure on them to maintain their families, women believed *'man cyaan tek de pressure'*. It was only too common for men to default on their financial responsibilities to their families and 'sport out' their money.²⁵ A frequently spoken refrain is depicted in the words of one young woman:

But yuh know, even seh he give me lil bit of money, if he do something good with de money it wouldn't bother me so much, but fuh drink de money or gamble de money it would ache me,...sport with de money, pick up women and so.

(Nicola, age twenty-four)

A common retaliation by women was to withdraw their domestic services and resources. One woman who was working but whose partner was not, decided to revoke her housewifely duty to cook for him:

At first, right, I feel he didn't care. I use to try to make sure he get he meals when de day come. I feel he never use to do nutten. He would just get up an' go pon de road and come back and wouldn't tell me any ting. Well I just stop doing it. When I get home I throw back too [do nothing]. I seh well nutten in de pot. Is only now ah see he would say ah en get nutten to do and I try at Mr This and Mr That and they tell me come back next week. And I start holin' in and as long as me belly full and me children belly full, I ain' care one damn.

(Marilyn, age thirty-six)

Women also deceived their partners about jobs and money: *'Every time he never wanted me to work, and I went and got my job behind his back!* These deceptions led men to accuse women of marrying for money not love. Young women indeed were candid in their assertions that they were in relationships primarily for financial reasons: *'Ah mean we were friends. Den I feel I had to get somebody financially to help out, so I could get some money in me hand. It*

was the financial part. Yet another woman explained why she had left a two-year relationship: *'We couldn't get along. I had financial problem. I didn't want to be friendly with any person for just fun and joke.'* Meanwhile, men in visiting relationships felt women commonly expected them to provide material goods to raise the standard of living of the family and if they 'fell short' then women would leave them.

Men's fear of women leaving them and damaging their reputations resulted in attempts to exert control over women's sexuality, most commonly through the enforcement of serial monogamy for women. Men were anxious to explain the problems caused for their reputations if women's sexuality was not controlled: *'Because if she have another partner persons tend to mock at her husband or partner'; 'It looks too bad'; 'It would not be fair for the man'; 'Not knowing if her children is mine'; 'It can cause corruption in the home'; 'It might cause murder.'* Policing of women as a group most commonly took the form of dictating the way 'respectable' women should dress and behave, as in the following claims: *'Women should not wear short skirts'; 'They must not wear pants'; 'They must not smoke or drink'; 'Romans 7.2 tells you woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he or she lives.'* Another area of social control specific to individual women centred around controlling their movements. Employed men who were married or in 'livehome' relationships commonly discouraged their partners from working, expressing their desire for a woman who would stay at home and take care of the family. Their concern was not in accepting that women could also be bread-winners—men's increasing economic vulnerability had led to a greater, albeit begrudging, acceptance of the need for their partners to work—but in losing control over women's movements and social interactions. This could even extend to their partners' not having contact with other women with whom they could gossip. A woman who engaged in gossip not only threatened her moral reputation and virtue, leaving herself open to accusations of 'eye-pass', but was also a signifier of men's inability to maintain control over her. These efforts at control often resulted in conflict:

I had a friend used to come to the house, she was my daughter godmother. He [her husband] might come and meet me and she talking. He gone kick up a stink, so like that we used to end up in a quarrel. So he never use to want me to mix wid people.

(Karen, age twenty-eight)

Respect for women was tempered by suspicions that if not at home immersed in housework and child care, they would stray and engage in affairs. Women constantly complained about men's jealousy and insecurity and the extent to which this limited their personal and social freedom:

He never use to want I go nowhere. Just want to get me home all the time just yuh know like fuh caring the children dem. Like if I can mek

fifty children would nice for he because he know I got to stay home and look at dem.

(Marsha, age thirty-seven)

Well...like if I go out, [and] anybody should look at me,...den he would get vex and so. We ent going out no more because any time we go out yuh always knowin' somebody or somebody always callin' at you...He would like fuh know he come home and he can meet me home all the time.

(Jo, age forty)

Men's perception of women's freedom as an opportunity for the latter to engage in affairs was a view endorsed by women (also see Barrow 1986):

Where dey nuf man and woman dah is confusion...dis is what does really happen. Dis wife gone left and say she goin' to meeting and sometimes is not the meeting she goin' to. She goin' and meeting him [laughter].

(Ena, age fifty-nine)

Although not as frequently evident as men's 'serial polygamy', women engaged in liaisons outside their relationship, even though detection could have serious consequences. When ideological control or the withdrawing of economic resources was insufficient to keep women from challenging traditional gender hierarchies men resorted to violence. Indeed, in Linden (as in Albouystown and Meten Meer Zorg East) men's violence to women and children is widespread (as is women's to children). Men's violence was simultaneously a statement of their ownership of women and recognition of their inability to fix women's behaviour by discursive or other material means. But women's agency could not always be contained by violence either. In situations where leaving was not an option women found the most effective response was to retaliate (see Chapter Eight).

Despite men's claims of women's fickleness and women's bitter recriminations of men's inability to satisfy their emotional needs, women often accepted an unhappy, adulterous or violent marriage. In other words, the status women gained from marriage was often incurred at a cost; their 'respectability' as married women combined with a lack of feasible alternatives meant they would leave only as a last resort:

Is nine years since [he] out of a job right and it appears to me like he ain' care. Next year I gon be 40 and dat gon be 18 years of marriage. Ah say leh me tell you, me ain' going tru wid dis. I give he a deadline because me ain' able live all me life. Me ain' able live so.

(Jenny, age thirty-nine)

Economic impoverishment thus served to facilitate a double standard in terms of relationships. Women's mean wages and unstable employment with lack of benefits or pensions left many still reliant on men to provide for them, putting constraints on their expanding sense of entitlement. Hence, they accepted as a given (although it was often with expressions of open contempt) their partner's involvement with 'outside' women. As one widow stated (see Barrow 1986 for similar findings):

I had a nice married life, the only thing, my husband liked a lot of women, but were treating me nice and dese tings, carrying me out, have time fuh me and dese tings. Although he had other women, he used to find time for me. I say is just like he ain' had women to me, because my needs use to be fulfilled, and he had love his children and dat is what keep us together. And I does say I glad fuh marry again and get a husband like wha' I had.

(Yvonne, age thirty-eight)

Although to differing degrees, women would tolerate male infidelity as long as they and their children did not financially suffer as a result.

A further source of tension (as in Meten Meer Zorg East and Albouystown) derived from the rigid gendered division of labour in the household that proved resistant to women's increasing responsibilities outside the home. Although women felt men did not do their 'fair' share of housework, they were reluctant to question the division of tasks within the home. To do so would transgress the foundation of their sexual identities; too much immersion in housework would deprive men of their masculinity and run the risk of turning them into homosexuals (see Chapter Eight). As one woman commented:

I don't feel a boy child should be, you know, his time should be occupied in the kitchen. I feel dat does change dem up.... It get a boy right behind us you know, he grow with his grandmother and constant doing housework and ah mean dey say his mind does really cause it. He is a faggot right now.

(Karen, age twenty-eight)

That the erasure of masculinity takes place when men occupy women's spaces and supposedly adopt women's identities is a process that is not only wellknown and avoided, it is also one that is learnt from an early age. As one mother commented on the differential access boys and girls had to public space:

Guys don't have respect for little girls [teenagers] and if dey see yuh go certain place they want to tek dey eyes and pass yuh. So I don't allow her to stay out late. But de boy I would give him more privilege, he got to be a tough man in de street.

(Marilyn, age thirty-six)²⁶

Conclusion

The consideration of gender and sexuality as constituent dimensions of racialised working-class identities disrupts traditional narratives of masculine-dominated histories. Up to the 1970s both male workers and their female partners had the parameters within which they reproduced themselves determined by Demba. But the success of Demba in imposing a hegemonic paternal masculinity and domestic femininity was limited. Its conferment on its workers of patriarchal status (as a concession for good behaviour), in its efforts to establish a more productive labour force, was challenged by both men and women. In the 1990s the institutionalised differences between males as workers and women as housewives no longer apply and the sanctions Demba placed on women's and men's behaviour have been superseded by norms that emphasise working-class respectability combined with a middle-class orientation. Men and women attempt to traverse the gap between these norms and the lived nature of relationships by the policing of each other's sexuality. In doing so they attempt to deny each other their practices of independence, leading to the claims (as against Demba) of the erasing of masculine agency and the fixing of femininity. Neither has the decline in male employment and increase in female employment, with their material consequences, had a severe impact on norms. That changes in social practices have been accommodated to ensure the continuity of norms speaks to their threading together by the hegemony of heterosexuality. This has proved not only to tie women and men together in their mutual desires for their social reproduction of 'Afro-Guyaneness' but also to limit the potentially divisive consequences of economic and social changes. It has also prevented transformations in one area of women's lives—such as increasing engagement in income-generating activities—leading to improvements in other areas of their daily lives—such as men's participation in housework. Thus are current practices of masculinity and femininity among the Afro-Guyanese working class, and the (hetero)sexualised meanings underpinning them, part of the ongoing process of being included on their own terms in the struggle for dominance in relation to social, economic and sexual opportunities.

Notes

- 1 Despite women's widespread engagement in paid work and their participation in strikes and protests, Caribbean nationalist and socialist discourses have maintained a silence around the construction of gender and sexuality in the formation of working-class racialised femininities and masculinities (see Ford-Smith 1997), and in the more general literature on mining communities and movements only a few studies have addressed issues of gender and sexuality. See, for example, Parpart 1982; Miller Klubock 1997; Gibson 1991.
- 2 For discussion of which refer to fn 16 in Chapter Five.
- 3 There is also a small earlier literature that addresses masculinity. See, for example, Brana Shute 1979; Lieber 1981.

- 4 Although masculinity takes centre stage in this section, our focus on its interaction with femininity causes us to privilege women's voices and interpretations of their experiences.
- 5 Given the ethnic homogeneity of Linden's population we do not have sufficient material to comment on the other stereotypical model of masculinity, namely Indo-Guyanese men, but see Williams (1991) for material from the 1970s in Guyana and Miller (1994) and Sampath (1993) for Trinidad.
- 6 To focus on homo- and heterosexuality is not to deny other orientations, such as those with 'an absence of gender-driven sexuality' (Gutmann 1992:258) or the cross-gendered (Lancaster 1992). Neither do we wish to adopt an unproblematised notion of homosexuality, but there is not the space here to investigate its sexual economy and the rules of its practice in Guyana.
- 7 Anti-men refers to all homosexual men but specifically denotes those whose bodily deportment and gestures encode them as effeminate.
- 8 This is not to say that Indo-Guyanese men do not lime; indeed, they do. But liming, particularly in rural areas, takes place in relatively homogeneous racialised groups.
- 9 The attempt to uncover the meaning and original form of a place name is often linked to the desire for recovery of a lost relationship to place considered to be more authentic than that of the present (Gregory 1994). Certainly, the place name of Mackenzie bore the burden of a history of colonial subjugation, but its renaming as Linden (after Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham) was also an imposed construction that is still open to contestation today.
- 10 The 1991 Preliminary Census gives a figure of 33,808 and the HIES of 31,427.
- 11 A major element of the gap that exists between the community and Linmine was the latter's decision in the late 1980s, in a SAP-promoted rationalisation exercise, to divest itself even further of its social reproduction role. In 1986 it reduced its contribution to the housing programme and hospital services. In 1993 it terminated subsidies to the Mackenzie Hospital Complex and other public services. Most importantly, a series of major retrenchments, started in 1983 and continued over a ten-year period, resulted in a 60 per cent reduction of the labour force (Peake 1998). After the awarding of the Linmine management contract in 1992 to an Australian firm, Minproc, the central components of its restructuring continue to be retrenchment and divestment.
- 12 For example, in 1993 the water supply system was still operated and maintained by Linmine at a nominal charge to the town's residents (\$G192/annum); street lighting was still provided free of charge; the electricity bills of workers were subsidised; and the salaries of teachers at the Mackenzie High School were supplemented (Khan 1996).
- 13 Given racialised patterns of voting Linden is a PNC stronghold, but from the 1960s onwards this has not prevented dissatisfaction with working conditions being directed at the PNC-dominated Guyana Mine Workers Union (GMWU), who, Quamina (1987:6) claims, '...have a dismal record of corruption and abuse of union funds and contempt for democratic procedures'.
- 14 Employees have most commonly resisted the company's control over them by establishing unions. As early as 1944 the British Guiana Labour Union set up a branch in Linden. It was short-lived with the large-scale retrenchments of the mid-1940s but it resumed shortly after in 1946. In 1950 it was replaced by the British Guiana Mine Workers Union (BGMU) and later by the Guyana Mine Workers Union.
- 15 Watooka and Richmond Hill in southern Mackenzie were (and again are) the areas of residence of the Company's expatriate and higher-level employees.
- 16 In 1967 a local authority was established for Mackenzie and Wismar, although the company was still able to play a significant role in community affairs because of its

- ownership of the community's infrastructure and the concentration of financial, technical and managerial resources within its employ.
- 17 Schools, for example, which provided the company with its future labour force, semi-skilled and attuned to the rhythms of industrial labour, segregated black and white children. Boys and girls were taught different skills, handicrafts for boys and domestic science for girls, serving to integrate children into their future economic roles as company employees and employees' wives. Moreover, schools beyond Junior High level were not established. Those wanting to complete a high-school education had to have the means to move to Georgetown. Instead, in 1958, the company opened a Trade School for male apprentices, further guaranteeing their labour supply.
 - 18 Until 1964 the company operated the only store in the town charging artificially inflated prices (Quamina 1987).
 - 19 Demba's attempts at social engineering, blocking formal-sector employment for women until 1971 and encouraging its workforce to marry, led, in 1960, for example, to women comprising only 24 per cent of the labour force, with a total of only 1,100 women in employment, whereas women formed 36 per cent of the labour force in Georgetown (1960 Census). Also in 1960 the proportion of the adult population who were married was 62.7 per cent in Linden yet only 54.5 per cent in Georgetown (1960 Census).
 - 20 The company did not attempt to regulate all areas of sexuality; domestic violence was not seen as a threat to stable family life.
 - 21 A variety of other reasons were also cited: *'During menstruation a woman cooks unhealthy food and makes unhealthy drinks so a man needs an alternative at that time'*; *'King Solomon had more'*; *'Yes, something your wife don't do this other woman will do'*; *'According to the census there are more women than men, so yes.'*
 - 22 Of particular interest in this regard is the survival of homosexual practices among Creole working-class members of the Winti religion in Suriname (Wekker 1997). Mati work, engaged in by men and women, involves having sexual relations with members of the same and opposite sex either simultaneously or consecutively. Wekker (1997:337) comments, 'While mati's own accounts do not mince words about how disappointing, untrustworthy, and generally "doglike" men are, they stress the positive choices they make to be intimately connected with other women, citing the companionship, solidarity and sharing of childcare and everyday (financial) worries they find in their mati. Sexuality, especially with women is seen as an inherently joyous and healthy part of life... While sex with women is seen as fun or even "sport", sexual relations with men are often viewed as transactions, necessary to motherhood, and a potential source of financial support.' It appears these women have been able to establish a set of criteria in relation to their mati and a mode of interpreting those criteria that falls outside the dominant hegemony of heterosexuality.
 - 23 Here we concur with Williams (1996c:149) who contends: 'There is less a singular patriarchal ideology to which males can apply for legitimacy and authority than there is a unitary expectation that male agency will be employed to produce a mode of domination.'
 - 24 Communities of lesbians do (quasi) openly exist in the Caribbean, although not in the same overtly politicised form that lesbian movements have taken in the North.
 - 25 Brana Shute (1979:51) claims men's relationships with men follow a similar pattern. They are 'loose, shifting, short term, and not totally committed...there is no sharp bifurcation of interaction rate and style when men deal with men or women; both groupings replicate similar patterns and mutually reinforce one another.'
 - 26 See Parry's (1996) study of educational attainment among boys and girls in a number

of Caribbean territories, in which she claims the 'sex/gender identity' of girls is forged through the heterosexual relationships they establish with older males, but boys, because girls of their own age do not relate to them, develop their sex/gender identity through the rejection of non-heterosexual relationships. As one teacher asserted, 'Girls seem to be more interested in sex at this age whereas I think the boys are more afraid of homosexuality' (Parry 1996:7).

WOMEN ACROSS PLACE

Introduction

The preceding chapters, by focusing separately on women from three communities, have highlighted the necessity of moving beyond unproblematic and totalising representations of ethnicity and gender. What we have seen is neither a homogeneous group of women nor uniform groups of Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women. Instead there are racialised gender identities, which are simultaneously affected by discourses at the national and global levels and locally constituted by and constitutive of different places. So for example, Indo-Guyanese women in Meten Meer Zorg East experience more constraints in relationship to marriage and employment than their Albouystown counterparts. Afro-Guyanese women from Linden articulate views on marriage which in some ways echo the sentiments of Indo-Guyanese women more than those of Afro-Guyanese women from Albouystown. The women also share certain experiences in the household and in relationship to men in the labour market, although there is no guarantee that the meanings attributed will be the same.

If the last three chapters were primarily about how women's lives and identities are shaped within specific places, then the remainder of the book attempts to consider women across places (to be sure, one only has to think of the women who travel to other areas to work or to visit relatives to recognise that relationships do exist which while place-specific are not place-bound). We take as our point of departure four interrelated issues that were dominant within and across all of the communities: household expenditure and decision-making; management of housework; external social networks; and domestic violence. In all of these cases women's access (or lack thereof) to resources and their roles as mothers and household managers overwhelmingly emerged as a central theme. Accordingly, we begin by considering some debates around the relationship between resources and women's position within the household.

The household: a closed box?

The household or home is not just a physical entity, but a discursive construct deployed to locate oneself in a complex and often confusing world. The

phrase 'to feel at home' is used to invest material and metaphorical spaces with ideas of family and familiarity, and with feelings of organic belonging and comfort. It represents the institutionalisation of stability. It is these deeply interrelated notions of harmony and stasis that feminist researchers call into question by addressing the household and the broader network of relations within which it is embedded.

For well over a decade neo-classical analyses have come under scrutiny for their treatment of households as units within which resources and income are evenly distributed, premised on the assumption that the head of the household—necessarily a man—would ensure welfare maximisation within the domestic domain (see Becker 1981). Critics have rejected the treatment of the household as an undifferentiated entity governed by completely altruistic principles (Bruce and Dwyer 1988; Hart 1990; Kabeer 1994; Sen 1990). A variant of this approach, the New Institutional Economics, attempted to introduce inequality into the pattern of decision-making. However, by retaining the assumption of individualised and voluntaristic modes of decision-making, it failed to consider how individuals were constituted through structures and relations of power (Kabeer 1994).

Amartya Sen provides a telling critique of neo-classicist models of household behaviour. His identification of the household as a site of co-operative conflict foregrounds the relative bargaining power of its members, and he emphasises that gender inequalities are partly maintained by people's perceptions of the division of labour and distribution of resources as natural (Sen 1990). One shortcoming of Sen's model, however, is a reliance on perception biases to explain why women make the well-being of others a priority and do not act in their own (best) interests. This version of 'false consciousness' for women (Hart 1990) assumes some objective indicator of interests independent of perception, and overlooks the fact that 'needs' and 'rights' talk is profoundly political (Fraser 1989).

Other analysts have expanded on Sen's contribution to incorporate issues of ideology and power. Bina Agarwal (1994), for example, elucidates two interlocking dimensions of the bargaining process. In the first place, access to resources—for instance employment, land, property, information, credit, capital—affects the options women can exercise by refusing to accede to a particular decision. Naila Kabeer similarly describes households as 'regimes of risk', a reference to the gendered penalties which women may face from refusing to co-operate in the production of domestic consent (Kabeer 1994:127). Second, resources do not exist in a discursive vacuum. Meanings and systems of social legitimacy also need to be carefully considered, for they affect not only the pattern and outcome of the negotiations but even what is admitted into the bargaining process itself.

On both these points the household is not seen as a bounded or autonomous entity. As Henrietta Moore (1994) points out, to answer the question 'how are resources redistributed within the household?' requires

attention to the ways in which meanings and identities within the domestic domain are constructed across other overlapping sites. Thus, for example, employment may give a woman access to an (independent) income in the home other than her husband's, but is earned—and limited—through her participation in a stratified labour market. Additionally, whether or not her status as an employee is validated at home may be partly influenced by wider factors, such as how state policies define gender roles nationally or the response of her wider kinship network. This emphasis on fluidity does not invalidate the utility of the household as an analytical construct. On the contrary, although the household as domestic space does frequently impose physical restrictions, confinement and even seclusion on certain of its members, it is important to consider the flows through which these spaces are made meaningful and experienced as constraint, and the ways in which repeated acts of occupation recreate them as female and subordinate.

The insistence on context and flows is critical for understanding why households may not always—or even—respond in the same way to apparently similar material conditions. If resources are fundamentally cultural, that is to say, economic assets have little meaning outside of the discourses which define them as productive, then it is critical to look at how rights and obligations within the household are defined as well as challenged, rather than impute a form of 'ahistorical rationality' to the domestic domain (Barrow 1996; Wolf 1992). Such an approach thus acknowledges that women, in their everyday lives, negotiate from within the interstices of specific hegemonic representations.

In the context of Guyana this means recognising ethnicity as a modality of assimilating members of the household into their respective roles (by shaping the intimate relations of partnership, parenthood and kinship) and as an analytical tool for elucidating and differentiating the activities and processes of household bargaining. At the same time, and given the instability and constructedness of racialised divisions, it is important to capture the resonances between women's lives where they occur. This chapter examines how racialised groups of women in specific places draw on resources within and beyond the household in their everyday domestic relations. We begin by looking at women's access to resources in Albouystown, Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden.

Access to resources across three places

While our own surveys cut across urban and rural divisions, employment was the most significant source of an income for all households. In none of the communities did either men or women have access to land (whether owned or leased), although in Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden a few grew vegetables or tended small numbers of livestock for home use. Property ownership also varied across place, in that most Albouystown residents were tenants while there were substantial numbers of owner-occupiers and rent-free households in Linden and

Meten Meer Zorg East. With the exception of a few female household heads in Albouystown who sub-let rooms, no-one earned money from rent.¹

State benefits in the form of pensions, national insurance, social assistance and disability payments were meagre, and collected by few women. Most consisted of payments from the Social Impact Amelioration Programme (SIMAP). Only 22 per cent of the women in Albouystown, 28 per cent in Linden and 24 per cent in Meten Meer Zorg East were SIMAP recipients and the money was supplemental in the most minimal sense. At the time of the interviews, for example, the payments of \$G500/month to pregnant women or mothers with children under the age of two were inadequate to purchase a five-pound tin of powdered milk which lasted less than a week. Child support (offered through the courts) was also virtually non-existent in Meten Meer Zorg East and Albouystown, and only in Linden did some women (17 per cent) appear to have access to such payments. Women cited the small amounts on offer, the difficulty of securing compliance from men and their reluctance to deal with the court system as reasons for not seeking legal recourse.

Informal extra-household transfers from family and friends were important but relatively limited. In Linden 25 per cent of the women stated that they received money and goods regularly; in Albouystown the figure was 20 per cent, and 10 per cent in Meten Meer Zorg East. Such transfers originate both from within and outside of Guyana. Certainly many of the respondents in each of the three communities had a family member or knew of someone who had recently migrated, mainly to the United States and Canada, and to a lesser extent to other Caribbean islands. However, inflows (barrels or boxes of goods, and money) tended mainly to arrive on special occasions—at Christmas or on birthdays. Most households did not receive remittances on any regular basis and they tended not to figure very highly as a strategy for improving the household's productive assets. Only three of the women—two from Albouystown and one from Linden—had actually obtained assistance from family abroad (mothers) to invest in small self-employed ventures.

Assistance from relatives and friends in Guyana was more prominent, but even here it was more likely to come in the form of *ad hoc* exchanges of goods and services rather than regular monetary transfers. Women pointed out that inter-household exchanges were being eroded under the current economic climate, and frequently commented that '*wid dis bard time wha' goin' on now*', it was difficult to rely on external networks for financial assistance.

The point to be made here is not that the resources outlined above are not critical, but rather that for the women in this study employment remained the most reliable and regular source of income. None the less the relationship between women's employment and their position within the household is by no means straightforward. In particular the responses of women, asked whether anything changes between a woman and her partner when she begins to work, revealed the culturally acceptable parameters within which Afro-Guyanese and

Indo-Guyanese women positioned themselves. Afro-Guyanese women overwhelmingly identified income-earning as the route to more equality within the home:

Dat idea of the one wage, one paypacket, I don' like it, the man does turn dominant. But when the woman earnin' she own money, dey know the woman goin' talk back to dem when dey talkin'. When yuh don' wuk, when dey start quarrellin', yuh got fuh shut yuh mouth.
(Agnes, age forty-three)

Yes, hear the reason why. I does like to handle meh own money. So today or tomorrow if yuh get wrong (disagree), and he decide fuh stop givin' you money, yuh could still fall back on wha' you wukkin' fuh. And yuh would get more respect. Because dey would always tell dey self dat yuh big.
(Joan, age twenty-two)

This contrasted significantly with the Indo-Guyanese women, most of whom expressed views ranging from cautious optimism to outright scepticism:

He might feel funny and seh 'And I give yuh everything, tek care [and what if] yuh got a [another] man.' Dat same ting does cause big choppin' up story [physical abuse for the woman].
(Seewantie, age fifty-two)

I think dat as long as a man and a woman got understanding, she could wuk, and if he seh no, yuh got fuh tek he advice, as long as he tek he money and bring it.
(Sheila, age twenty-six)

As both sets of statements show, economic resources embody cultural meanings that impinge on the degree to which those resources are recognised and validated. In this case it is the social legitimacy of female employment that distinguishes the two groups of comments. Economic independence was a common concern among Afro-Guyanese women, undoubtedly related to the view that relationships with men will not necessarily last. For the Indo-Guyanese women, who expect and are expected for the most part to be in long-term legalised relationships, the right to employment itself has first to be established.

The quotations above reference the historically specific starting-points outlined in Chapters Three and Four; certainly by the early twentieth century patterns of employment for Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women were becoming relatively distinct. At the same time, they do not correspond fully with contemporary social practices. A few Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown and Linden reported that their partners did not like them working and as we have already seen, economic independence is often more

an ideal than a reality (Chapters Five and Seven). On the other hand, increasing numbers of their Indo-Guyanese counterparts in Albouystown and Meten Meer Zorg East were entering the labour market as a response to economic crisis. This was hardly ever done without women representing employment as a necessary extension of their domestic duties as a wife and mother (Chapters Five and Six). Consequently the transition appears to have been achieved with male consent (albeit reluctantly in many cases), and it was significant that very few working women reported their husbands as being actively opposed to their wives bringing in an income.

The more limited employment horizon in both Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East, as compared with Albouystown, led to some place-based distinctions. Few women from either Linden or Meten Meer Zorg East worked in Georgetown where income-earning opportunities were greatest (four from Linden and one from Meten Meer Zorg East). In Linden prohibitive transportation costs and child-care difficulties prevented women from broadening their geographical domains. In addition to these factors, the spatial boundaries for women in Meten Meer Zorg East were circumscribed, if not by explicit order then as a result of an unspoken community consensus that while Georgetown offered more opportunities for jobs it was delimited as an Afro-Guyanese space.

The range of possible options was thus more limited for women from these two communities than for both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women in Albouystown, although as we shall see in the following section on how financial resources and decision-making are managed within the household, it is the low level of earnings across the board that presents fundamental constraints for all women.

Domestic management: resources and decision-making

With increasing numbers of women entering the labour market as a result of the high cost of living, to what extent does women's independent access to an income affect their position within the domestic domain *vis-à-vis* men? What limitations do they face and how do women (whether working or not) respond in a context in which they are most strongly identified as mothers?

In Albouystown, Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden, the dominant form of management of household income was a woman as the financial manager, irrespective of ethnicity, age, the type of relationship or employment status.² Women tended for the most part to be given a proportion of the wages of contributors and organised the daily budget. In a few cases partners paid fixed bills such as electricity and rent while the woman was given a housekeeping allowance. Women's management of household resources stemmed from their association with domesticity, whether or not men were seen as the breadwinners or both parties were expected to earn. Women consistently emphasised the work it involved, the fact that it disproportionately fell on them and the general lack of interest men showed in such affairs: '*Is woman tekkin*'

the problems. He don't tek interest. He's just tek the money and give yub. Any problem, is me. When he come home, is he gettin' the food.'

Ursula Sharma, in her study of women in Shimla, North India, posits that resource management has two dimensions, work and power, which 'need not be vested in the same person' (Sharma 1986:87). Benería and Roldán's (1987) work on Mexico City similarly distinguished between budgeting and control to emphasise that while women assume responsibility for basic expenses, they are largely unable to make decisions about large or irregular purchases and are often denied information about their partners' earnings. In this study as well women's everyday management of the household budget was limited by the power of disposal over wages that was men's prerogative. Women were much more well-informed about their partners' earnings in Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East than in Albouystown, where a common complaint was over non-disclosure. The difference stemmed from the large numbers of men working with the dominant employer in the first two communities; roughly 40 per cent of the women's employed partners in Linden worked in bauxite while some 70 per cent of women's partners were working in the sugar industry in Meten Meer Zorg East. Earnings were common knowledge in both places; as one woman from Linden noted, if men tried to keep their wages a secret, women '*would mek it their duty to find out dat*'. Such information was not so readily available in Albouystown, where employers were far more diversified and the informal sector was so widespread. Women in non-residential relationships were also less knowledgeable about male earnings.

Knowledge of how much their partners made did not, however, alter the control men could exert over their income contributions to the household. In the vast majority of cases women were not asked how the money was spent, although a few (mainly older women) had to provide written or verbal accounts of their expenditure. The difficulty of making ends meet was a common source of frustration, and the fact that most women were expected to cope with whatever they were given acted as a further source of discontent. To ask for more money meant having to then account for one's spending, or possibly being accused of wasting scarce resources and managing the household inefficiently. In this regard, income-earning allowed women to contribute to the household budget and make purchases without constantly having to justify what the extra money was needed for.

The area in which women were able to exercise most influence was in the disposal of their own earnings, although it is not always the case that women can do so and much may depend on their position within the household and ideologies of appropriation (Bruce and Dwyer 1988; Salaff 1990; Standing 1991; Wolf 1990). In our surveys both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women generally retained control over their earnings. However their patterns of spending differed from men, illustrating how notions of rights and responsibilities shape allocative decisions, and importantly how female income-earning also resulted in some men actually decreasing their financial input.

I does always like fuh hide me money from he. He don' even know how much money I'se mek. I'se tell he the wrong thing...yuh can't tell man anything, girl. He would want I put up [contribute] more... He's rather skimp yuh wid goods and drink it out...If you ent know to wuk yuh brain wid dem, yuh would get leff penniless...and my own does still spend back in the house. Man really like dem don' care. Is you got to see everything good.

(Sita, age thirty-three, Indo-Guyanese counter attendant)

The children father, when he see me mekkin' money, he's give me less. Early on we use to have big fuss and fight. Now I ease up. Is a waste of time...So hear wha' I'se do. If I mek like six Christmas tree, he's count it and ask how much I sellin' it fuh, and I'se just tell he the wrong price. He's say, 'yuh selling it cheap!' I don' tell him a thing. Yet my money, fast as I sell, I would go and buy things like wha' I need fuh the house and put it down. I buy the household items, like the children's clothes and so. All the money wha' [I] draw does go all back into the house. I don't get nothing fuh spend on meself.

(Jenny, age thirty-two, Afro-Guyanese craftmaker)

Women frequently kept the exact amount of their earnings secret in order to maintain the level of their partner's contributions. Men's non-disclosure, on the other hand, served to control the amount of money they could withhold from the domestic unit for their personal use (primarily for use on 'sporting'/'liming').

One can see how these gender-differentiated patterns enact and reiterate masculinities and femininities (it is noteworthy that in Linden, where discussions with men took place, the majority of interviews took place in beer gardens or other locations outside the home). It is widely recognised in literature on gender and development that women's spending patterns reflect a heavy investment in the domestic domain (Benería and Roldán 1987; Bruce and Dwyer 1988; Young *et al.* 1981). Explanations have revolved around versions of 'maternal altruism', which construe women's identification with the home as a consequence of their representation as mothers and household managers. Both Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women regarded motherhood as an integral part of their individual and women's collective identity. Any extra money was put towards food, children's clothes, household goods and, in Meten Meer Zorg East primarily, religious activities. Relatively fewer women spent on themselves than men and the amounts were much smaller. In Meten Meer Zorg East, for example, one-third of the women cited personal spending, invariably to go to the cinema, but this constituted one-fifth to one-tenth of what men allocated to themselves. Moreover, women's self-expenditure was among the first to be cut when resources were scarce, while men might (or not) reduce the amount they took for themselves without abstaining altogether.

Women from all three communities tried to save. Income-earners were more likely to do so, but women who were not employed tried to put something aside from the monies given to them by partners and other resident and non-resident family members or friends. As these were mainly small amounts, informal rather than formal mechanisms were the preferred method (some women also saved at home and had items of gold jewellery that could be pawned whenever money ran short). One such institution is the box-hand, an informal saving system also found in the wider Caribbean in which a group of persons—co-workers, friends or kin and usually women—contribute an agreed sum of money according to a fixed time period. On each occasion the total sum (the box) is given to one of the players. The box ends when everyone has drawn her share (Senior 1991). The penny-bank is another saving mechanism. The money is kept by someone in a position of trust for a fixed time period (a good friend or reputable community member), at the end of which it is collected in full. Women can deposit at any time and as much as they can afford. The pennybank allows women to save incrementally while box-hand gives the player access to substantial sums of money interest-free that is then repaid in smaller sums over the duration of the box. Women earning an income were far more visible in these informal mechanisms, as they had a more reliable sum of money, critical for the box-hand which collapses if someone reneges on her pre-arranged payment. In Albouystown, where employment opportunities for women were best, box-hand and penny-bank were the most popular forms of saving. They were least widespread in Meten Meer Zorg East.

Although women with an income were more likely to participate in decisions over the purchase of major items, their ability to take the initiative or make final decisions was, with the exception of female heads in visiting relationships, restricted by their comparatively low earnings in all three communities. One way around this was through the informal networks noted above which allowed women to save incrementally. Monies were converted into goods for the house. Box-hand tended to be used for furniture or other large household goods, while penny-bank was more likely to be drawn down at Christmas to cover expenses or in case of emergencies. Increasingly women—mainly in Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden—were entering into hire-purchase arrangements to furnish their homes. This reflected a relatively recent drive by local and international firms to increase sales by making them more easily accessible to low-income women. Not surprisingly, given the low and sometimes irregular wages and high interest rates applied, repossession was a constant worry. In Meten Meer Zorg East and Linden, where only 18 and 26 per cent of the women rented accommodation, box-hand was sometimes used to upgrade property, in contrast to Albouystown where the majority of women interviewed were tenants (over 75 percent).

On one level it could be argued that these patterns of spending simply reinforce women's position and identities as mothers, and exemplify their collusion in their own subordination. But as Sarah White (1992) cautions in her

study of Bangladeshi women, such a conclusion ignores the ways in which women may 'capitalise' on the resources available to them. Nor can we ignore the fact that despite a common dissatisfaction with the opportunities and conditions of work facing them, the women articulated a sense of self-worth derived from not having to depend on partners for money or perpetually justify their expenditure. They spoke of their satisfaction in being able to make small purchases that had been vetoed by their partners. Saving devices also enabled some women to circumvent their low incomes that constrained their input into making decisions about large household goods. One woman described how her cumulative savings had allowed her to buy furniture; another pointed out that through her earnings she had been able to upgrade her home. These actions, and the sense of validation that comes from them, need to be set against the seemingly repetitive gendered expenditure divisions, as they exemplify women contesting the power of others to decide on or curtail the everyday ways in which mothering should be carried out.

In this regard women were also making their own decisions about family size, a response generated by economic obligations and the limited role men assumed in family planning matters. Women without children were viewed with sympathy or derision; in fact less than three per cent of all 384 women were childless. In Meten Meer Zorg East such women were regarded as lesser persons; in Albouystown they were described as barren; and in Linden some were labelled homosexual. However, women of reproductive age consistently reiterated their desire for small families. Interviews indicated that contraception was regarded largely as a woman's responsibility, but this was compounded by the fact that men did not like to use a condom and women felt unable to force them into doing so. The extended quotation below by Bibi, a twenty-six-year-old Indo-Guyanese woman with six children (two of whom she had tried unsuccessfully to abort), paints a graphic picture of the extent to which many women go and the dangers they face in order to maintain some semblance of control over their bodies.

I don't intend to get no more [children] in dis hard time. If I could do it again I would mek three. You know how much things I drink to throw away [the last two children]? I deh drink kerosene, antibiotic, bush, all kinda thing, but it was too late. Me didn' get the money at the time to do the things wid dem [have an abortion]. It was like I deh runnin' mad, because I deh say what I doin' wid so much of dem [children]... you know how much I throw away [abortions I have had], is an army. I throw away 'bout five belly. I went to [doctor A] two times and [doctor B] one time, but I nearly dead. The next time I drink bush and den me and me husband had lil sex and I get up fuh go bathe and the floor—we ent had bed—wash away with blood, about two tenny [potty] full of blood, but I didn't go to the doctor. I look after meself. I know all dem bush wha' you'se got fuh drink to throw away

belly, dey got a woman by the market does sell it...yuh drink howsoever much yuh could afford. Then you just got to lie down on yuh back. How I did studying [worrying] last week, I say oh God leh I get dem things [menstruation]. I deh worried to know if is baby again me did gettin'. I used to use tablets [contraceptive pill] but first time when I use it I feel so upset and since so, I never drink it back. So now I don' use nothing. I say if anything, I would buy dem same things again, the bush, once I got the money.

Bibi stressed her determination to control the size of her family; there was no mention at all of her partner sharing or taking any responsibility for contraception. While abortions were illegal at the time of the surveys (see Chapter Four), for the right price they were carried out by doctors in many hospitals. For those women who could not afford them (and women from Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East also had to pay transportation costs and find somewhere to stay in Georgetown, where an abortion is easiest to procure), 'bush medicine' was a routinely used abortifacient, but this was not free (the herbs are bought from special vendors in the market) and some women described resorting to bleach and kerosene when they did not have enough money. Preventative measures most cited among women of reproductive age were the 'stop', the 'five-year stop' (intra-uterine devices) and the pill. Among older women, for whom such methods were unavailable, abortion and 'bush' were primary forms of birth control; one woman for instance cited experiencing an abortion on a yearly basis over a period of some twenty years.

Managing housework

Despite the reconfiguration of gender roles and relations in countries hit by SAPs (Afshar 1992; Benería and Feldman 1992), the renegotiation of domestic chores has been found to be an area most intransigent to change (Chant 1994). In the present study there was little involvement of men in the unpaid work of the home beyond the tasks represented as masculine. This is despite the reality that many women were themselves working for an income and notwithstanding the fact that even where they were not, the rigours imposed by lower real wages and a breakdown of physical infrastructure have led to new difficulties for women in their efforts to keep their households afloat.

The implications of this gendered division resulted in a rigidly structured and highly unequal division of labour in the domestic domain. Women did the cooking, washing, cleaning, sewing, ironing, shopping, child care and garbage disposal. Men figured in repairs, work around the yard and some bulk-buying of non-perishable groceries (such as rice and sugar). Although fetching water was largely a job for men and boys, their absence for much of the day from the home meant that women also performed this chore when supplies were exhausted.

Some of these tasks required different types of work according to where one lived. For instance, in Meten Meer Zorg East, where the floor of bottom houses was made of baked mud, cleaning extended beyond sweeping, scraping and washing down floors to the task of daubing them regularly (with cow manure and water) to prevent cracking. Rubbish was buried or burned in Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East, whereas infrequent collection and little if any area to burn or bury in Albouystown led many residents to dispose of garbage in alley-ways and drains in the area. Water was most easily accessible in Linden. Life was more tedious in Albouystown as a result of burst mains and a residential structure in which a number of households shared a single pipe in a yard. In Meten Meer Zorg East only the 35 women living in the Housing Scheme benefited from piped water in their yards and houses. The remaining 65 who occupied the squatting settlement relied on one of the two public standpipes for potable supplies, made trips to the trench nearby to wash clothes and dishes, and collected water in oil drums when the rain fell.

It was not surprising to find working days of up to seventeen hours being recorded for women (and even these do not fully capture women's work as multiple tasks are often simultaneously carried out), underlining the extent to which women's days are taken up in unpaid and socially unrecognised work. This was as visible in Afro-Guyanese as it was in Indo-Guyanese households. Indo-Guyanese women described the challenge they faced to combine income-earning activities with their primary role, namely the successful management of the household. Employment was a legitimate sphere of activity for Afro-Guyanese women, but women were additionally obligated to strike a balance between income-earning and household chores in a way that men were not:

I really feel dat women have it harder than men. Even if you're a housewife and dey bring the lil money, is you who got to do the maths wid the pot and the general cleaning as well. If dey wukkin', you wukkin' too. Den on top of duh is you who got to bear the babies and look dem after. Dem does only put it in.

(Surna, Indo-Guyanese, age thirty-one)

We [women] really worse off than men, because the man just have to wuk, duh is all. The woman does got to do housewuk, look after the children, wuk off she own [have her own job], and yet still turn back in the night to him when he lookin' for she [have sex], because sometimes after all that when yuh tell dem yuh tired, dey don' want believe yuh.

(Nancy, Afro-Guyanese, age twenty-two)

Women were quite clear that housework constituted work: *'Yuh know how much energy you got to put down to clean and scrub out your house? Is only because you ain't gettin' a salary dat dey's say it ain't wuk. When yuh wukkin' as a domestic, yuh ain't getting' a salary? And is not the same wuk yuh doin'?'* (see also Massiah 1986). None the less, there was some ambivalence over the

allocation of responsibility, and even women who expressed resentment at the minimal participation of their partners explained it by referring to men's inherent unsuitability for such duties: '*...I can't depend on men, men can't do as much. Men can't do everything dat a woman can do, for instance washing, cleaning. Dey would clean yes, when dey mind give dem to do it [when they feel like it], but not to suit you so [not properly].*'

Women's perceptions of domestic chores as their province meant that they were grateful to partners who occasionally helped ease the workload. 'Helping out' differs from sharing in that it leaves the association between women and housework stable. Men could therefore *choose* to assist, without the obligation faced by women. By rejecting associations with specific types of roles—which might inevitably occur through the act of repetition—not only are representations of women's and men's tasks stabilised, but the disruption of such demarcations is refused.

It is noteworthy, however, that women were far more likely to participate in household jobs which were deemed male. While this was especially pronounced in female-headed households, it was nevertheless also an aspect of the experiences of women living with men. That women's involvement in 'male' activities did not appear to pose similar problems for them, suggests that it is the *devalued* property of female tasks which is the issue. For the men, to participate in such chores, or to be seen to participate beyond offering token assistance, threatens ultimately to displace masculine heterosexual identities (see Chapter Seven). As one woman commented, '*Me husband don' do it at all, be's seh dub is anti-man [homosexual] wuk.*' As it is less powerful, men experience doing 'female' tasks as demeaning while women may experience male work as empowering.

Given the limited redefinition of the domestic division of labour, three responses formed part of each household's repertoire, varying slightly across ethnicity and place in the extent to which they were or could be drawn upon: restructuring of one's time; involvement of other household members; and recourse to external circles of kin and neighbours. Of these mechanisms the first was at the forefront of working women's lives, involving the reorganisation and lengthening of one's day engaged in activities that for the most part were carried out on behalf of others within the domestic space. This was prevalent amongst those who worked from their homes; in fact the centrality of unpaid domestic work in their lives was rarely displaced and frequently prevented them from earning more. The latter two strategies were especially important for women working outside of the home and indeed often made it possible for such women to enter the labour market.

Wider female networks have been described in the Caribbean and elsewhere as playing a critical role in easing employed women's domestic duties (Chant 1991; Senior 1991). Non-resident women were indeed relied upon, although support was largely restricted to the provision of child care as they were often just as busy. Moreover, too much help, and too frequently, could result in social censure at the inability of the woman to effectively

manage her household affairs. External assistance was thus not all-encompassing, and who one lived with turned out to be more important in determining whether a woman was able to lessen the time spent performing chores that *could be postponed* until she finished her income-earning activities. Children assisted before and after school and on weekends, particularly in households with no other adults. While leaving school at an early age had been common among the older women, this no longer appeared to be as regular a practice, although daughters were occasionally kept home to babysit and there were numerous cases of children attending school irregularly because the costs—transportation, food, clothes—were prohibitive. The allocation of housework in all three areas was both age- and gender-specific. Where girls were much younger, boys tended to be given some responsibilities such as sweeping the house and washing dishes, but girls increasingly assumed these tasks as they grew older.

A higher proportion of Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown and Linden were able to depend on extra help from other resident women, given the visibility of female-headed households among this group and the greater likelihood of such households to be extended through the inclusion of other adult females. Notwithstanding these variations, working for an income, intensified in the current situation, has led to little change in women's responsibilities within the domestic domain.

Social networks: 'band wash band mek band come clean'³

Researchers have noted that one response to economic immiseration and disinvestment in public and social infrastructure has been an efflorescence of collective localised action in the form of self-help groups, mother's clubs and neighbourhood organisations.⁴ In our case-studies—indeed in Guyana more generally—there was a relative lack of community-based responses to economic crisis and adjustment. Prior to political and economic liberalisation, the autonomy of civil society was severely restricted, leaving little room for non-partisan activity (see Chapter Nine). This has not surprisingly continued to act as a disincentive in some areas, with people easily suspicious that community efforts will be linked in one way or another to a political party. Women also stated that they had little time to get involved in self-help activities, and only religion—the mosque, temple or churches of various denominations—appeared to attract them in significant numbers. Given the paucity of neighbourhood-based initiatives, dyadic networks (Rubenstein 1987) have become increasingly important as a means of supplementing or consolidating household resources.

In the Caribbean kin and friends (fictive kin) form a key aspect of women's social capital. The extent to which they can draw on such resources depends on their position in the household and in this regard it is their identity as mothers and domestic managers which provides the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977) generating access to extra-household sources of income and goods. This

observation about women's central position within kinship networks has been based on the lives of primarily Afro-Caribbean women (Pulsipher 1993; Rubenstein 1987). It corresponds with Carol Stack's evocative study of life in an African-American project in the United States, which displaced previous studies of dysfunctionality and deviance with its vivid portrayal of dense and supportive kinship relations in which women played a central role (Stack 1974). The Indo-Caribbean kinship system, in contrast, is represented as a 'nuclear' family linked through the activities of the male head to a system of reciprocal obligations to the extended family (Jayawardena 1963; Vertovec 1992).

Possible similarities have tended to be overlooked by reason of a relative dearth of comparative material. In fact, at an informal level the Indo-Guyanese women in this study were just as actively involved in the exchange of goods and services. For both groups of women, then, the strong emphasis on mothering responsibilities combined with economic immiseration required and enabled them, in their role as domestic managers, to secure goods and services from their wider kinship network.

Not surprisingly, female heads tended to rely more heavily on such extra-household assistance than women who lived with men. The visibility of women within these mutual exchange mechanisms in the Caribbean has led some researchers to overlook the presence of men (Rubenstein 1987). Others have pointed to the strong relations women have with men as brothers, uncles, grandfathers and especially sons (Pulsipher 1993; Wolfe Gordon 1988). Our data similarly suggest that men occupy positions other than husbands and partners which frequently imply male—female relationships of comfort and sustenance. Men, especially brothers and sons, tended to give money—a 'frek' or 'small piece'—whereas women additionally contributed household items (groceries) or other goods. As we have seen, women were also predominant when it came to assistance with child care, whereas male relatives were called upon far less frequently and then only to help with tasks designated as masculine.

Neighbours and friends were also important in all three places. For the most part this involved the borrowing and lending of small household items and exchange of information and gossip; very rarely was money mentioned: *'Neighbours always come, steady [frequently] want somethin', want hand brush, want soap fuh borrow, lil soap powder, lil bleach.'* During one interview, for example, a stream of women 'dropped by' looking for bread, tea, juice, matches, a spoonful of sugar and conversation. In only a few of the cases did mutual assistance with housework exist.

To what extent did these relationships of mutual dependency cross racialised lines? Given the ethnic homogeneity of Linden and Meten Meer Zorg East, these were far less evident than in Albouystown where some 35 per cent of the community were Indo-Guyanese. Exchanges appeared to depend more on one's neighbours than on one's ethnicity, and some of the women—especially vendors who operated in the city's markets—also threw box-hand with groups that were ethnically diverse.

Undoubtedly the shared physical environment experienced by households combined with women's responsibility for the domestic domain necessitated a degree of co-operation among the women despite a divisive discourse: trying to get a tap repaired, sweeping a yard shared by twenty households, erecting temporary walkways during the rainy season to avoid the sewage which flooded yards when choked alley-ways overflowed. These ties are not, however, immune to the exigencies of national political life. Fieldwork in this area began one month after the 1992 general elections and Albouystown, historically a PNC stronghold and with a majority of Afro-Guyanese residents, was reeling from the success of the PPP at the polls. Although everyone remained calm apart from a few alleged incidents of brick-throwing, women—few of whom appeared to have voted—spoke of the tensions that had developed on their streets in the period immediately following the elections. Afro-Guyanese appeared to anticipate triumphalism among the Indo-Guyanese, while the latter feared retribution from Afro-Guyanese. Neither expectation materialised, but a few women described a temporary suspension of inter-ethnic patterns of exchange with neighbours living in the same yard. If at one level the daily struggle to make ends meet tempers the racialisation of everyday life, it has been as yet unable to displace the general suspicion and distrust fostered by the larger political climate, and which as we have seen in Chapter Five are manifest in pervasive ideas of difference.

Whether or not they are employed, then, women as mothers have access to goods and services beyond the household, but it would be a mistake to assume that through the use of such networks their reliance on male partners is lessened. Few women can rely entirely on external assistance and even fewer can afford to regularly maintain another household. Accordingly, diversifying one's resource base is not so much a choice as a necessity in the face of scarcity, allowing women to plug the gaps in their daily budgets created by inadequate wages or male neglect. Given existing material conditions, 'an elastic, open-ended kindred system, permitting adjustment to changing circumstances, is the most appropriate adaptive mechanism' (Rubenstein 1987:234). It substantiates—and the importance of this should not be underestimated—but it rarely substitutes entirely. Men as partners are therefore not a last resort but rather remain critical as sources of material support; as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, this poses severe limits on women who are caught in violent and abusive relationships.

Social networks, domestic violence and women's place

The parallels between Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women in terms of the informal exchanges which accrue to them as mothers must be balanced against the pre-eminence of marriage among Indo-Guyanese as compared with Afro-Guyanese, for whom other types of relationships with men were regularly acknowledged and accepted. Moreover, social meanings of motherhood are

produced through the household's articulation with wider kinship systems, which play an active part in the constitution of gendered and racialised identities.

Distinctions in the activation of kinship networks were demonstrated most clearly in relation to domestic violence, which was widespread in all three communities and across age and ethnicity. Physical and mental abuse surfaced frequently in interviews, and included beating, alcoholism, sexual infidelity and the withholding of money. Some took extreme forms: *'When he drunk he a pull me out from the room an' so he a shake meh. He put knife a web throat. He put cutlass a meh neck. He beat meh an' bruk de teeth...he boist a kick fuh kick me in the mouth. He tek out be leather [belt] fuh beat me.'* One woman's hair was burnt off in a kerosene stove by her husband who suspected her of hiding money in her plaits. During fieldwork, one woman had her arm broken, while another was almost fatally stabbed. Yet another woman was ritually beaten by her husband because she said he liked to see her cry. These various actions converge in their aim of instantiating women's subordinate 'place', whether that took the form of ensuring financial and emotional dependence, limiting women's movements outside of the household and contact with others, undermining or belittling women in front of others, or insisting on proper performance of household duties.

In Guyana everyday constructions of violence against women are that they are to be expected. Partly an expression of male dominance, violence is also represented as a sign of men's commitment. In local parlance it is said that *'if meh man don' beat meh, he don' love meh'*, although there are limits to the amount of abuse that women can or will accept. Some women fought back, but for those who were physically unable to defend themselves, retaliation took a number of forms. Some women kept small quantities of sulphuric acid as a defence against an abusive partner, while a few respondents spoke of waiting for their partners to fall asleep before injuring them, on one occasion by pouring kerosene oil on the bed and setting it alight. The comment of one fifty-two-year-old woman, abused by her alcoholic husband for twenty-five years, highlights how such actions are typically last resorts: *'Look, one night I siddown an' cry. I siddown wit' a cutlass and I seh, as he sleep, I gone cut off be neck. Is me son mek peace in the home, he seh mommy, he drunk and you sober, is who yuh tink the police goin' lock up?'*

Women's responses are mediated not just by the physical (and psychic) reality of pain, but also by economic and cultural considerations which invest those experiences with meaning (Harvey and Gow 1994). Notwithstanding similarities in the use and extent of domestic violence by male partners, Indo-Guyanese women generally expressed more reluctance than their Afro-Guyanese counterparts to leave an unsatisfactory partnership. In the virtual absence of effective official recourse and the widespread view that domestic violence is a private affair (see also Chapter Four), women draw on informal mechanisms which are primarily kinship-based. Among the Afro-Guyanese women familial networks made it possible for women to leave abusive

relationships, with many returning to their maternal home for a period of time. Employment was also *always* identified as a key factor behind the woman's initiative to leave and was represented as an alternative to marriage and co-residentiality. As one woman said of her previous partner, 'When I decide to leave him, I know I had a job to mind [support] me.'

This contrasted with the situation facing many Indo-Guyanese women, as we see from the following comments made by one woman whose daughter, employed and a mother of three young children, was regularly abused by her alcoholic husband:

Look at Sunita, sometimes when dey get wrong [Sunita and her husband], she does come over here and stay one night, two nights and go back. By [as] she got the children, she would hustle to be back by sheself...how long you goin' stay by yuh mother when you got yuh husband and children? She meet a lot of things wid him [had to endure a lot of problems], but she stay. And then she got children, and for her alone, even if she wuk and all, it goin' be hard...I seh stay wid your husband. Because how the father would come in to the children [look after them], no-one else would do it. Plus how it goin' look good, to leave yuh husband and tek a next man?

(Meena, age fifty-seven)

The unspoken contrast with what is seen as Afro-Guyanese life ('to leave yuh husband and tek a next man') underscores the centrality of marriage and motherhood in constructing Indianness, and anticipates the social opprobrium attendant on leaving (see also Chapter Five). The absence of familial support is a further crucial consideration in a context where the economic costs of leaving an abusive relationship must be counterpoised against the difficulties of women single-handedly supporting their homes. Another Indo-Guyanese woman pointed out:

If me and he [her partner] left [separated], I'd got to go wuk. When I go, nobody goin' tek care of the children. And me mightn't wuk the way he does wuk [earn the same amount of money] to mind [provide financially for] the children. When he do me anything I does shut meh mouth, because I gettin' and den again I got me son, so yuh does done realise as a woman, what yuh got fuh tek [endure].

(Camilla, age thirty-one)

While familial networks did provide an important source of emotional support for abused women, they did not appear to act as an alternative to the extent that they did for Afro-Guyanese women. It was repeatedly stated that one should make the best of a bad marriage, and many women cited instances where their families intervened to defuse difficult situations but would not countenance separation.

If Indo-Guyanese women were more likely than Afro-Guyanese women to remain in the domestic unit, this does not mean that they passively accepted their situation, but rather that their responses were inflected by considerations of the costs of 'losing face' within the wider Indo-Guyanese community.⁵ They engaged in a number of strategies which throw into relief the contradictions within hegemonic discourses surrounding their position as wives and mothers within the kinship network. Thus, for instance, one Indo-Guyanese woman in a long-term abusive relationship consistently lied to her husband about her earnings, took money from his pockets whenever he was drunk and then spent the night at her mother's home, and had considered slipping tablets into his food which were widely reputed to curb alcoholism.⁶ She was also determined to ensure that her own daughter (seven years old at the time) would be welcome to return to her maternal home if she encountered similar levels of violence.⁷

Differences between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women were, however, not absolute but were mediated by place and economic necessity. Kinship networks among Afro-Guyanese women, while supportive, were not infinitely elastic, and where several children were involved it was far more difficult for women to leave. One Afro-Guyanese vendor whose arm was dislocated by a jealous partner acknowledged that her only option would be to leave her four young children or find another man, since her family could not possibly provide for them all. The result of a separation for women with infants or with little recourse to relatives or friends was quite often entrance into a relationship with another man with the hope that he would *'help mind'* (financially provide for) her children. Additionally, in Linden where marriage tended to be more widely acknowledged and emphasised than among Afro-Guyanese women in Albouystown, women who were married commonly expressed the view that *'yub mek yub bed, yub must lie in it'*.

Among the Indo-Guyanese women, their place within the family, even an abusive one, had greater force in Me ten Meer Zorg East than in Albouystown. The intimacy of village life (the majority of the women had married men from the same village or had moved from within a four-mile radius) meant that social censure would be far more immediate and certain while the relative paucity of employment opportunities restricted women's possible options. Tellingly, a few of the women from Albouystown who had left abusive husbands had previously lived in rural areas, and described having to leave their communities to find employment and avoid gossip. Of the Indo-Guyanese women in our study who had been separated, almost all were from Albouystown although the majority, like Afro-Guyanese women, had entered into new relationships of dependency with men.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how rights and obligations construct and differentiate women's access to resources and negotiating strategies within the

domestic domain. To be sure, at some levels there were differences between Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women, notably where representations of work and responses to abusive relationships were concerned. Yet these were responses which could only be made intelligible within specific contexts and places (so that the findings from one community could not simply be generalised) and which also intersected with wider relations to produce experiences which resonated across racialised divides.

It is the characteristics that women share across place that are also of interest: their increasing visibility in economic activities; the incommensurability of male and female income streams within the household; the decline in fertility as a response to economic costs; the delegation of housework almost entirely to women; the pervasive threat of domestic violence; and the centrality of their identity as mothers. What is also clear is that the work that women have had to shoulder has intensified, as a result both of shrinking social provisions and economic pressures, and of the apparent reluctance of men to assume a greater share of domestic responsibility. Indeed, it is likely that under circumstances in which men's role as main or dominant income-earner is being severely eroded, gender divisions within the home may become more entrenched as a remaining symbol or bastion of masculine identity and dominance and we should not therefore expect a simple erosion of such boundaries.

Are we to assume, then, that these gender-differentiated responses form part of an unchanging schema, and reinscribe a hierarchical binary between male and female responsibilities and identities? While 'familiar' gendered divisions were present in the ways in which all of the women organised their everyday lives, it would be a mistake to conclude that the meanings attributed to their experiences in the present context remain unchanged. For both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women, and in all three communities, women's sense of their contribution to the domestic domain, and the centrality of their work as mothers, are heightened under present economic conditions. In the opening pages of this chapter we noted that what gets defined as a productive asset is a matter not of natural fact but of socially constituted structures and discourses of power. If women are, as we have seen, continuously denied adequate and equal access to resources, it also increasingly appears to be the case that they are recognising the worth of their socially devalued activities as mothers and validating them as productive. This is not to say that motherhood is central to all women's experiences, or even that it is experienced in the same way. Rather it is possible to read it as enabling women not only to repeat their traditional roles but equally to disrupt the expected logic: fulfilling traditional roles under crisis and/or in non-traditional ways may well lead to redefinitions of those positionalities.⁸

Finally, without underestimating the similarity of many of the issues that faced both groups of women, and while recognising the potential for reconfiguring racialised and gendered identities, it is important to avoid the equation of form and content/meaning, particularly in Guyana where the convergence of social practices is accompanied by racialised representation

and polarisation. In the final chapter we examine this problematic through a case-study of a women's organisation which does not start with an assumption of similarity, but rather attempts to arrive at shared agendas by connecting spheres of life and by working with and through differences.

Notes

- 1 In Meten Meer Zorg East squatting settlement, some people who had migrated began returning after the 1992 elections to erect small properties which they rented out, but residents in the area are not themselves a part of this, citing the difficulties of evicting tenants as their main reason.
- 2 Other researchers have found a variety of distributional patterns within the domestic domain, based on such factors as age, earnings and social identities. Benería and Roldán for example (1987) identify the common fund and the housekeeping allowance in their study of Mexico City, while Hoodfar (1988) in her work on Egypt recognised six categories of budgeting and financial arrangements ranging from women receiving their husband's total pay-packets to those whose husbands contributed nothing to the domestic budget.
- 3 A local saying which emphasises the importance of mutuality in relationships.
- 4 This has been noted especially for Latin America, although some believe that its significance has been highly overestimated. Gonzalez de la Rocha (1995) contends that in fact privatised household mechanisms have been most critical for women and low-income communities, and we would argue that this is also the case in the Caribbean.
- 5 In an otherwise thoughtfully argued study, Danns and Shiw Parsad (1989) assert that in Guyana, violence is utilised by Afro-Guyanese men to achieve control over women, and by Indo-Guyanese men to maintain control over women. Not only does this rather unproblematically reproduce an essentialist cultural divide, it also reinforces the stereotypes that Afro-Guyanese women are partially autonomous actors while Indo-Guyanese women are subdued victims.
- 6 The tablets can be purchased over the counter at several pharmacies and were especially familiar to the women in Albouystown. They are also reputed to induce occasional fatal side-effects such as heart attacks, although no-one had actually heard of this happening.
- 7 Recently, and since fieldwork was completed, there have been a number of examples (not all from our fieldwork sites) of Indo-Guyanese women leaving abusive relationships, although many have been forced to leave their children behind with their mothers-in-law (in a sense, the cost of leaving is to renege on what it means to be a mother). In the absence of any comprehensive research, we are unable to account for this apparent shift, although economic conditions and increasing public discussion and awareness of domestic violence appear to be possible factors.
- 8 Recent research has begun to explore how ideologies of motherhood may lead to women being increasingly prepared to cross the barriers between male and female jobs. It is possible that under conditions of economic crisis and where deregulated labour markets constitute the new globalised era, women as mothers will increasingly come forward for jobs that are symbolically male but now divested of remuneration levels compatible with that status. See Laurie 1997; Standing 1989; Trotz 1998.

RED THREAD'S FEMINISM 'A politics of the possible'?

Introduction

The previous chapter supports the claim that the ability of low-income Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women to mobilise material and symbolic resources is simultaneously constrained and made possible by their immersion in kin networks, yet any transformation of their gendered and racialised identities is more likely to take place through engagement in practices which enable them to acquire and share resources from outside their kin networks.² Accessing such resources, however, is hardly ever a spontaneous event, but rather a learned process, one which requires dislodging the sway of hegemonic discourses.³ Nor is this a process that has been readily promoted in Guyanese society in the interests of women. Dominated by male-led political parties, few spaces for women's self-empowerment have been carved out of the political landscape. Moreover, serious consideration was not given to a woman-centred movement based on 'popular' feminism until the 1980s, with the emergence of one particular women's organisation, Red Thread Women's Development Programme. Seeking to inscribe a new space into the topography of the Guyanese political landscape, Red Thread emphasises that transformation of the 'self' is the core element in women's self-empowerment, which in the Guyanese context has necessitated working across racialised differences. In this final chapter, we turn our attention to Red Thread's transformatory potential.

Empowerment and difference

Women's self-empowerment, the struggle to understand and challenge the reproduction of relations of domination across multiple sites, entails material and discursive aspects that cannot be separated out.⁴ One example of the difficulties raised by such an attempt is Moser's planning framework for low-income women in the Third World, which adapts Molyneux's distinction between practical and strategic gender interests. Briefly, practical gender interests 'arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labour...[and] are usually a response to an immediate perceived need' (Molyneux 1986:233). Strategic gender interests derive 'from

the analysis of [women's subordination] and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist' (Molyneux 1986:232). Moser's conceptual model converted gender interests ('prioritised concerns') into gender needs ('the means by which concerns are satisfied') (Moser 1993:37).

The practical-strategic needs planning model appears to offer a fairly straightforward, if prescriptive, gender-aware analytical lens. Yet this is precisely its principal sticking-point. In leaning towards the generalisable, it sacrifices the particular, resulting in a framework insufficiently sensitive to geographical and historical location and—consequently—shifting meanings.⁵ This formulation also creates a division between the practical and strategic realms that is untenable in practice, and may result in a hierarchy of needs that can all too easily slide into the colonising gesture against which Chandra Mohanty (1991) warns.⁶ Indeed Moser is all too aware of the need for 'bottom-up' agenda-setting (Moser 1993: Chapter 9), although she overlooks the fact that in the vocabulary of development planning, needs talk tends to exclude political considerations and involves a top-down perspective (see Kabeer 1994:296–7).

Moving beyond *a priori* and static assumptions permits us to acknowledge more fully diversity and tensions not just across women's organisations (for instance in terms of history, aims, composition, the articulation and pursuit of strategies), but also, as we hope to show in our discussion of Red Thread, within them (see also Alvarez 1990; Waylen 1998). As we have argued throughout this text, gendered identities are the product of interlocking social relations, and are always in a process of becoming. It is critical that we integrate these reflections in order to trace, rather than gloss over, the always uneven and shifting terrain through which popular feminisms are produced (Molyneux 1998). As the Red Thread experience amply demonstrates, this is the complicated stuff of which daily interactions and connections across differences are made.

In the place of forms of empowerment that do not interrogate essentialist notions of identity, Yuval-Davis elaborates upon the notion of transversal politics, in which the outer limits of the group are set by what members want to accomplish (itself open to change) rather than by who they are assumed to be. Transversal politics recognises that women bring specific and different experiences to bear upon their involvement, but these do not translate into fixed identities or preclude exchanges with other women.⁷ Thus 'dialogue, rather than fixity of location, becomes the basis of empowered knowledge' (Yuval-Davis 1997:129). Although Yuval-Davis does not go beyond dialogue (to consider, for example, social practices or the occupation of space), by foregrounding difference, relationality and Haraway's (1988) notion of partial knowledge, the transversal path provides a unique angle from which we can begin to address the self-empowerment of differentially positioned women. Indeed, it is through case-studies that we can look at actual processes in action, and specifically at how internal differential power relations might be

manifested and grappled with where there is a commitment to transform existing inequalities (Yuval-Davis 1997:130; see also Connolly and Patel 1997).

The emphases on context and contingency serve as the point of departure for our enquiry into the ways in which Guyanese women have been historically rendered as political subjects. After outlining the spaces negotiated by differently racialised and classed women that have structured the emergence of women's organisations in Guyana from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1990s, the remainder of the chapter examines the development practices of Red Thread, and the always uneven path it treads between empowerment and subordination.

The development of women's organisations in Guyana

As elsewhere in the Caribbean (Deere *et al.* 1990; Reddock 1994) and Latin America (Fisher 1993; Jaquette 1989; Matear 1997; Navarro-Aranguren 1992), women in Guyana have long been involved in struggles for their rights. While women's organisations existed throughout the nineteenth century, these were formed and led by the wives of the white colonial élite. Some of the first groups to emerge undertook charitable work. By the early twentieth century several more organisations had been established, many initiated by non-white women with high social standing in the community, some of which were organised along racialised lines (Kilkenny 1984; Peake 1988). This diversity, and influences from the first-wave feminism that was sweeping North America and Europe, also led to more emphasis being placed on social welfare work as a public rather than charitable responsibility. Among some of the activities in this regard were the provision of maternity clinics in rural and urban areas; the establishment of day care in Georgetown for working mothers; and helping poor women to earn an income through making handicrafts in their homes.

The impact of these organisations was twofold (Peake 1993). On the one hand, by setting themselves the task of helping women perform their assigned roles as mothers and wives more effectively, it can be argued that they helped to reinforce rather than challenge the hegemony of a value system which would later come to be broadly associated with the middle class. On the other hand, they existed at a time when women's representation in the political sphere was extremely limited. Although women won the right to vote in 1928, property and literacy qualifications excluded the vast majority up to 1953. Women also remained ineligible for membership of the Legislative Council until 1945 (Kilkenny 1984).

Against this backdrop, women's groups created a space and an alternative point of entry to the public domain. Moreover, the social status of their members enabled the issues raised to achieve broader acceptance, most notably the politicisation of welfare at a time when unacceptable social conditions throughout the country were leading to unrest. In this regard, these early associations were precursors of the organisations of the 1940s and 1950s

that called for women's political, social and economic equality, reconstituting the boundary between the public and the private. Among the first to emerge was the British Guiana Women's League of Social Services, an umbrella association formed in 1941 in response to the exigencies imposed by the war that brought together and rationalised the activities of existing groups. It became more directly involved in civic matters, advising the Government on Cost of Living Surveys and drawing attention to the plight of urban domestic workers. These initiatives not only extended the scope of women's activism, but also broadened the base of participation and support.

The period of anti-colonial and nationalist mobilisation also witnessed demands by women for greater recognition within the political sphere. The campaign for political representation led to the formation of the Women's Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) in 1946, support for which cut across racialised and classed divides, with many of its members having been involved in the earlier pre-war welfare associations (Kilkenny 1984). In addition to highlighting unsatisfactory social conditions and demanding government responses, the WPEO organised to demand an extension to the franchise and register voters. It came to an early demise in 1948 as a result of internal tensions, largely over whether the WPEO should put forward its own candidates for elections to the Legislative Council (which it did, albeit unsuccessfully, in 1947) or concentrate on organising efforts that involved the mass of Guyanese women (Peake 1988).

In 1953, and just one month after the elections that swept the PPP to power, the Women's Progressive Organisation (WPO) emerged. Three of its five founding members had been elected as PPP members of Parliament in the National Assembly and had been heavily involved in the WPEO. Shadowing the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of the PPP, the WPO saw itself as a mass movement with a commitment to scientific socialism as the only guarantor of women's equal participation in the labour force and the liberation of women and men. It intervened in trade unions on behalf of women in the sugar industry, attempted to organise domestic workers, and campaigned for an extension of state provision of social services. During the state of emergency after the suspension of the Constitution by the British parliament, the WPO (which was not banned) provided a crucial outlet for the distribution of information (WPO 1983). The momentum of women organising across racialised and classed differences was arrested following the splintering of the PPP (see Chapter Four, pp. 103–5). While the WPO remained faithful to the (increasingly Indo-Guyanese dominated) PPP, a number of its Afro-Guyanese members left to join the newly-formed (and Afro-Guyanese dominated) PNC. The latter started its own women's auxiliary in 1957 (initiated by Forbes Burnham), which became the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM) following the country's naming as a Co-operative Socialist Republic. In the 1960s the large-scale and cross-sectional mobilisation of women that had been achieved in the 1940s and 1950s now gave way to divisions along

racialised party lines, and the relegation of both the WPO and WRSM to playing largely supporting and subsidiary roles within a party-political framework, where their participation could not only be controlled and monitored but also harnessed to service the needs of the party, and although both organisations instigated changes that benefited women broadly (e.g. legal reforms), their racialised politics largely prevented them from working with women outside their party constituencies.

The WRSM illustrates how women's contribution to co-operative socialism became evaluated on the basis of their loyalty to the ruling party. Members were mobilised to organise fund-raising, membership and election campaign drives for the PNC, while remaining largely peripheral to the party executive. Subordination to the dictates of party policy took priority over the articulation of an autonomous and inclusive agenda. During the late 1970s, for example, when women entered the labour force through the informal economy as traders and played a critical role as providers of scarce and banned goods, their initiatives were denounced by the WRSM in line with official policy.

The circumstances under which the PNC came to office and then maintained its hold on power meant that only certain groups of women would be favoured by nationalist discourse. Not surprisingly, the WRSM never managed to recruit outside its traditional base and Indo-Guyanese women were markedly absent among the rank and file members. As the women's arm of the PNC, the WRSM monopolised women's access to state resources, which were distributed largely along party and—given the basis of real and perceived party affiliation and support—urban and racialised lines. But neither did Afro-Guyanese working-class women overly benefit from their allegiance to the WRSM—job creation projects produced jobs in the hundreds rather than thousands.

Towards the end of the 1970s, out of increasing discontent with the rule of the PNC and the authoritarian nature of the PPP opposition, a number of organisations comprising both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese merged to form the Working People's Alliance (WPA).⁸ While counterposing the hegemonic control exerted by the PNC and outlining an alternative political agenda based on multiracialism, forms of resistance such as the WPA still mirrored the masculinist nature of the political party. After the assassination in 1980 of its most popular member, Walter Rodney, the WPA no longer posed the same destabilising threat to the government and progressive forces in the country became increasingly sidelined. The 1980s in Guyana were a period of increasing authoritarianism; the dictatorial rule of Forbes Burnham, leader of the PNC, effectively closed off any political spaces for a vibrant opposition.

Hence, while Deere *et al.* (1990) claim that the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–85) helped provide the political space for the emergence of women's groups and a resource base for women activists throughout the Caribbean, in Guyana women's political participation remained firmly contained within political party bases. The following of party political agendas led to an inability to consistently prioritise women's needs, contributing not only to the

low visibility of women, but also to a climate unresponsive to changes in their situation. Moreover, after over two decades of government dictatorship, corruption, party political sectarianism and political intervention in workplaces and communities many migrated, and those remaining were increasingly alienated from politics and the political system. Notwithstanding the threats to the viability of the family in the 1980s, there was no development of collective attempts by women to organise independently of political parties or to make gender a priority until Red Thread came into existence in October 1986.⁹

Red Thread emerged partially out of what Paravisini-Gebert (1997:13) refers to as 'transisland cross-pollination'. She stresses the role interregional migration has played in the Caribbean in developing a feminist consciousness, political militancy and networks of communication (see also Yudelman 1989 on Caribbean women's organising). In the case of Red Thread members this 'cross-pollination' was provided by the tragic aftermath of the Grenadian revolution (Lewis 1987; Meeks 1993), and specifically by the virtual and abrupt demise of the women's arm of the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG). These events, coupled with similar strands of experience in the Guyanese context, led to a series of questions being raised about forms of organising around political parties and 'the national', and convinced them of the need for an independent organisation for women that would set and define its own agenda and priorities. This was reinforced by experiences in the community; in one incident during the 1980s, working-class women had been detained after demonstrating against food shortages. WPA women offered help, but were emphatically told by the women that 'we don't want your [form of] politics, we want food and money' (Andaiye 1998).

Red Thread's founders were a small, middle-class, highly educated, ethnically diverse and vocal group of women who had the political commitment and long experience of organising necessary for its establishment. All were active members or supporters of the WPA who were increasingly questioning whether the party could focus specifically on the needs of women.¹⁰ Although they had already engaged in various activities with women, such as protesting at food shortages, they disbanded the newly fledged Women's Section of the WPA and formed the autonomous organisation, Red Thread, thereby creating the space to raise gender issues without their being relegated to the back burner of party politics (D.Radzik 1992).

In the late 1980s, with the PNC's acceptance of SAPs, and especially in the early 1990s, with a return to power of the PPP and democratically held elections, an increased flow of external funds helped to foster the emergence of community action groups, NGOs and women's groups within the country, leading to a variety of positions that '...often clash with each other as women of different classes and races strive to achieve sometimes contradictory goals' (Paravisini-Gebert 1997:7). In addition to government-based initiatives such as a National Commission of Women and a National Policy Statement on Women,

there has been a recent (1997) attempt to organise a broad-based women's group, Women Across Difference (WAD). But a number of women's organisations are still not addressing issues of poverty and their implications for women. There is also a plethora of women's projects that have arisen as a result of the external funding flowing out of the Women's Decade. Established or funded by multilateral agencies, these projects target women for the distribution of aid but tend to be plagued with problems.¹¹ Most demands by long-established women's political organisations have been aimed at equal rights, such as equal opportunities in employment (usually through engagement in micro-enterprises), rather than questioning the basis of social inequalities or the ongoing naturalisation of women's place as being in the family. These developments have led to the reinforcing of the ideological public-private divide, with male-dominated political parties acquiescing to limited demands while making virtually 'no commitment to gender democracy in the home' (Charles and Hintjens 1998:19).

Within this context, developments by the WRSM and the WPO have been uneven. The WPO have retained their organisation intact and appear to remain committed to a party political mode of organising women, thus restricting their contact with Afro-Guyanese women. They provide (largely unquestioning) support for the male leadership of the party, although their most prominent members now hold senior government positions and have made efforts to address questions of gender equity, pushing through legislation previously developed by women lawyers on domestic violence and the legalisation of abortion, creating a Women's Leadership Institute and mainstreaming gender into the National Development Plan.¹² Despite the progressive nature of such legislative changes the lives of the vast majority of women remain unchanged, the high level of poverty, combined with little dissemination of information, militating against their ability to know of or access legal resources (see Chapter Four). Meanwhile the WRSM, no longer in a position to control resources, have eschewed the patriarchal model of the women's auxiliary to form a semi-independent caucus. Symbolising this move, in 1994, they adopted the new name of the National Congress of Women (NCW).¹³ However, neither the WPO nor the NCW has linked the social and economic disruptions in women's lives to the development policies and practices of the 1970s or the growth-oriented development models from the late 1980s onwards (outlined in Chapter Four). In another important respect the NCW and the WPO are similar in that both make little effort to work with women outside the racialised groups they have come to represent. Taking the racial polarisation of the country as a given, their practices continue to perpetuate it.

Kabeer's (1994:227) point that '[p]ower relations [can] appear so secure and well-established that both subordinate and dominant groups are unaware of their oppressive implications or incapable of imagining alternative ways of "being and doing"' encapsulates the context in which these organisations work and from which Red Thread emerged. Red Thread's recognition of the way in

which the economic crisis of the 1980s continues to impinge on women's lives allowed it to make a critical association between the the household and the economy, the local and the global and to critique discourses of WID and GAD for their legitimisation of mainstream definitions of modernisation and development based on notions of economic rationality (Andaiye 1995; see also Udayagiri 1995). Central to their concept of development (and similarly to a number of Caribbean and Latin American women's organisations) is the understanding that to many women, democracy in the home is more meaningful, and at any rate is inextricably related to democracy in the nation (see Charles and Hintjens 1998).

The development practices of Red Thread

Red Thread took the political vacuum of the early 1980s as its point of departure, denying the essentialist privileging of the party and its (male) intellectuals and crossing the classed and racialised ethnic divides to create gendered political subjects outside the logic of a fixed identity. Its task was one of establishing a viable cultural politics of difference, helping in small ways to reconstruct the fragmented civil society that had been turned against itself by the dictatorship of the PNC. Given the increasing level of poverty throughout the 1980s the initial needs Red Thread identified were economic ones. Adopting what appeared to be traditional WID initiatives and focusing on income generation, it organised short-term projects in four communities, both Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese (Peacocke 1995). Red Thread chose embroidery, a skill that many women possessed even if only in a rudimentary form, as an organising tool. The following extract from one of its founding members, Bonita Harris (1995:38), outlines the early ethos of the group.

The organisation's name, chosen at a time when the economic stringencies of the country made the essential threads for our [embroidery] work in short supply (especially the vital colour red), was consciously chosen because we recognised that while there would come a time when embroidery would no longer be our main activity, our name should always remind us of where we started.

But its work went far beyond WID objectives of establishing projects to generate income.

As women, we understood that the absence of democracy at the household level was a more pressing matter for the majority of women than the absence of democracy in national politics...Our decision was therefore to...begin the process of getting them to understand the value of their labour; to facilitate contact, work and exchange with women in other communities; and to develop modes of communication and education which would allow women without

formal education to learn, as well as to teach others; and to facilitate working and learning experiences which were not subservient.

(Harris 1995:38-9)

In its efforts to democratise development practices Red Thread was also creating a new discourse, one in which politicising cultural practices, reclaiming forms of representation and bringing them within its own control, was critical.

It was something new for rural women, embroidery being traditionally the skill of the genteel urban, middle-class ladies, not the rural poor in Guyana. The lilacs, the forget-me-nots, ladies with parasols and ringlets, the pussy cats and puppy dogs of the 'women and home' magazine patterns would be finally dislodged; local flora and fauna, Indian and Amerindian, Hindu and Muslim images would provide the basis and ideas for new designs. Embroidery could be a cultural and educational tool...Embroidery was not just about 'income generation', it was even more, or at least equally, about consciousness raising and about valuing women's work.

(Harris, quoted in Peacocke 1995:10)

Within a few years Red Thread had established embroidery groups in a number of communities, with a small retail outlet in Georgetown for its sales. Following the initial success of the embroidery groups, it proceeded to diversify its income-generating projects. Recognising the short supply and exorbitantly high prices of school exercise books it embarked on a project to produce these itself,¹⁴ moving on to community-based production and sale of low-cost primary education textbooks which led to the acquisition, in 1990, of a printing press. Throughout the 1990s the press and a desktop publishing house have provided the bulk of Red Thread's income; operating on a commercial basis they also publish educational and cultural material on a non-profit basis. Working through an internationally funded micro-credit scheme, Red Thread has also been involved in providing credit to women who wish to establish their own businesses, as well as (since 1991) running a laundry in Linden. Although all these projects (bar the laundry) have been successful in generating (various amounts of) income, Red Thread measures its degree of success not in terms of the amount of income generated but in the women participants' commitment to take over and run these projects themselves (Karen de Souza 1996).

In the early 1990s, Red Thread began to focus less on income generation than on efforts to change social consciousness through community education. While still engaged in embroidery a Group Building Team was formed which included an appointed woman from each of the communities in which Red Thread was working. Meetings of the team focused on skill development in chairing meetings, sorting out methods for organising their work and breaking down barriers between women from the different communities (D.Radzik

1992). These meetings led to the recognition of the need to take women out of their racially segregated communities and an Education Team was formed which brought together, on an almost daily basis, Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women from communities outside Georgetown.

The team has received in-house training in popular education methods as well as training from the Jamaican Sistren Theatre Collective. It has conducted hundreds of community workshops based on issues such as women's work, child abuse, family survival, community development, women's legal rights, sexual harassment, literacy and violence against women. It has also organised workshops promoting leadership formation and skill transfer. It has been contracted to do similar work for multilateral agencies, as well as being employed to conduct the community education components of water-delivery and construction projects in the interior. Its latest project focused on the production of a series of short television videos on child abuse. The most recent addition to Red Thread in the field of education is the Research Team. Started in 1993, the team's aim was to equip women with the necessary skills to participate in conducting the research reported in this book (see Chapter Two).¹⁵ It was after this experience that the women decided to form a permanent research team; it remains the only grass-roots women's group in the country to conduct research.

Through their work in the Education Team, members came to speak out about needs they were initially reluctant to voice. As a consequence, Red Thread started a Health Team in 1991 and after an initial focus on women's health expanded into community health issues.¹⁶ Domestic violence was another issue with which all of the women were familiar, but which was not initially raised. As in other Caribbean and Latin American countries, and in other world regions in the early 1990s, domestic violence emerged as probably the most important item on the agenda of many women's organisations (Moser with Peake 1996; Nelson 1996). Recognising the need to challenge the culture of silence around women's bodies, and along with a group of concerned women, Red Thread members have participated in the recently established Help and Shelter, a counselling service for battered women, transforming an issue primarily defined as private into one having a public and political status. In 1993 it produced a popular radio series on domestic violence from which it developed the script for a play called 'Everybody's Business'. It secured funding to perform the play in various communities along the coast and in 1996 it produced a sequel for another radio series. One result has been a flood of enquiries from parents and individual women whom it has helped to file petitions in court over sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence. It has also been at the forefront of advocating, designing and producing for popular dissemination legislative information pertaining to the laws of Guyana and women's legal rights, most recently in relation to the Domestic Violence Act.

Red Thread's recognition of the links between women's struggles and those of other marginalised groups has also led to its involvement with Amerindian

groups and environmental issues. As we emphasised in Chapter Four, Amerindian women are the ‘poorest of the poor’ in Guyana, but their predicament received little attention, until the 1990s, from either indigenous NGOs or multilateral organisations. While working with Amerindian women is not yet a central plank of Red Thread’s activities, it has been involved in sustainable development projects, providing support for indigenous skills, conservation techniques and natural resources management.¹⁷ Environmental projects run by women’s groups are virtually non-existent in the Caribbean (Dow 1997), and in this respect Red Thread’s involvement is more indicative of its international links—with the Women’s Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO)—than of any dialogue among women’s groups in the region.

Red Thread also actively works with other Guyanese organisations with whom it shares common concerns, such as Help and Shelter and Women Across Difference, although its critical stance on a number of state policies and their impact upon women—the harassment of women traders, the imposition of SAPs and the fight for free and fair elections—has prevented it from working more closely with the NCW and WPO.¹⁸ All of these activities have allowed it to become a place where women can access social networks, practical help and analytical skills, providing the opportunity for reflection and assessment of what has been naturalised and taken for granted. Table 9.1 summarises the group’s current aims.

Red Thread: whither progressive politics?

While Red Thread comes out of a long-established history of women’s organising in Guyana, it differs from other women’s organisations in its effort to develop an alternative vision that refuses to be confined/defined by racialised divides, traditional male-dominated structures and national boundaries. It has articulated its resistance through the adoption of insurgent social practices that refuse any placing; by inverting understandings of ‘proper places’, Red Thread’s ‘tactics’ (de Certeau 1984) emphasise the disrupting of boundaries, bringing into view disturbances of the everyday order: by its engagement in demonstrations, by taking working-class Red Thread women into the spaces of the university, by middle-class Red Thread women giving their invitations to travel to speaking engagements to village women, by taking a play on domestic

Table 9.1 The aims of Red Thread

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- Supporting Guyanese women and communities in empowering themselves
 - Building the unity of Guyanese women across race
 - Advocating the rights of Guyanese women, bearing in mind the particular situations of the poorest women, including Amerindian women, women with disabilities, single mothers/grandmothers
 - Building Red Thread’s capacity to sustain itself
-

violence into the public spaces of both the interior and the coast, by taking Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women into each other's communities to stage workshops, by proposing working-class women as chairs of committees, by teaching illiterate women how to read and write, by bringing Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women together to work in a shared space, by its insistence on its right to exist in a nation so rigidly demarcated by ethnic segregation and patriarchal privileges and by its refusal to be anybody else's 'other', it is displacing the distinction between centre and margin, carving out a space beyond that of the 'same' and its 'others'. This positioning of Red Thread as a place of counter-hegemonic politics has arisen out of a long struggle, one that requires the continuous searching out of the material and symbolic resources for its sustenance; constant vigilance against encroachment—both from without and within—of hegemonic constructions of Guyanese femininities; and perpetual engagement in the 'still ongoing decolonisation' (Lowe and Lloyd 1997:6) of racialised identities as well as in the seemingly endless exercise of combating the political crises of the post-Independence state. In this section we highlight some of the major barriers—both external and internal—that face Red Thread's mode of feminist politics and aesthetics of resistance, activities that are not without their own contradictions and constraints.

The internal organisation of Red Thread

Over the twelve years since its establishment Red Thread has had a relatively mercurial existence both in terms of activities and numbers. Currently it has twenty-five members who form a mixed group not only on the basis of ethnicity, but also class, age, religion, motherhood, political histories and geographical location. This relatively small number is a substantial reduction from a few years ago when over 200 women were employed; in 1992 Red Thread had a registered membership of 266 and an active membership of 116 (D.Radzik 1992). The fall in numbers reflects Red Thread's gradual change in focus from income-generation projects to activist research and advocacy, based no longer around separate teams but rather on a single collective.

Ironically, the decrease was in keeping with the original vision of the founders of Red Thread. The original conception was of a small NGO working with women across political parties and ethnicity which would deliberately not link work done with/for other women with membership. However, news of the embroidery work spread and attracted many women who themselves attempted to encourage the notion of membership, partially from a sense of familiarity and from a desire to ensure their access to material benefits deriving from the group (Andaiye 1998). The embroidery project, which had started as a response to household economic crisis, became a self-perpetuating endeavour that could not be sustained or expanded, given the absence of a local tourist industry and the paucity of local and overseas markets for the products. The numbers of women started to fall off, reflecting the inability of many women to participate in an

organisation that could no longer provide them with an income. Additionally, for Indo-Guyanese women, earning an income was the reason that their husbands had allowed them to become involved in the first place. In short, for the majority of Guyanese women whose material reality is one of having to deal with immediate needs and competing claims for resources, the relentless degradations of their everyday lives provide little motivation for engagement in activities that on the surface appear not to lead to increased access to material resources. But for the working-class women who have been prepared to make a commitment to working with the group during periods when no money was available for wages, the involvement of those who only participate when there is a guarantee of pay is a primary source of tension.

Since the early 1990s, the necessity of having to work for long periods almost entirely on the basis of voluntary labour has led to Red Thread encouraging women to take advantage of existing services and programmes. Notwithstanding the need to scale down its outreach operations, the terrain of Red Thread is still one of doing: workshops, seminars, radio programmes, video production, newsletters, life histories, academic and policy reports as well as letters and articles in the press have all positioned it as an important broker of public opinion. But despite its high profile in the 1990s it has had a relatively small impact within communities, its intermittent funding and fall in numbers preventing it from engaging in large-scale outreach activities. Given the coastal location of all the founding members, it has also been able to do less in Indo-Guyanese and hinterland communities, its attempts not to have an urban or ethnic bias being more successful in terms of the latter.

When it comes to increasing women's access to resources, then, Red Thread has accomplished more for its own members than for women as a whole. Yet what it has achieved for its members should not be underestimated. Providing women with wages (albeit intermittently), a meeting place and the opportunity to travel, Red Thread has a large symbolic power in terms of its members' perceptions, as the following statements attest:

I used to go to Red Thread workshops and just sit and not talk out. If I didn't like what was being said, I didn't say anything. Now you can't stop me. I'm the mouthiest. If I have a point and I know it is right I would say and argue my point. Before I would keep quiet, but not now.

(Nicola, quoted in Hart 1996:67)

After being involved I saw the opportunity to help other women develop themselves, and share information and health issues.

(Chandra, quoted in Hart 1996:68)

Red Thread changed ideas about things like beating child. I thought I was right. As a result of Red Thread I don't beat my child. We communicated...I deal with problems in the home differently.

(Halima, quoted in Hart 1996:69)

Members have become active and vocal women who have attempted to instigate change in their families and communities (Hart 1996), and who do not have the mentality of 'beneficiaries' but of '...people with a sense of entitlement at least as producers of a project, designers of workshops, and bearers of skills and thoughts' (Peacocke 1995:42). Given the fragmented nature of marginalised women's practices, Red Thread's group strength is an important asset and resource at their disposal. The focus not only on building group capacity but also on giving advice, help and support to individual women has enhanced positive self-images, self-confidence and personal growth. In this sense, the reduction in numbers has provided a greater opportunity for Red Thread to work towards becoming a more cohesive organisation whose members remain committed not only to the group but more broadly to working across divides and towards a shared awareness of interlocking relations of power.

Red Thread's current small size also gives no indication of the extensiveness and high profile of its activities on a regional and international basis.¹⁹ By linking into other national as well as transnational feminist alliances it has the opportunity to access material and symbolic resources that take it beyond local-level projects, although its small membership base can inhibit an integration between its global and local activities. Red Thread is thus faced with the paradox of a small membership and an increasingly high profile along with which have come increasing demands—facilitating groups, building links with other organisations and executing projects—adding further to the constraints felt by Red Thread members in relation to time, energy and money. Its meagre resources make even organising meetings problematic. The vast majority of members do not have access to telephones and there is only one office computer. Red Thread has no vehicle (only two women have access to cars), and public transport to and from Georgetown on a daily basis is expensive. Currently it has rent-free space but this is a temporary arrangement, highlighting that, in a context of poverty, place is always more than a metaphor,

Sources of funding and accountability

While Red Thread's investment in strategic coalitions across class and racialised differences and its refusal to confine its concerns and membership within national boundaries militates against its marginalisation from Caribbean and Western feminist discourses, it does not necessarily lead to engagement in, or acceptance by, the institutionalised structures within which Caribbean political parties operate. Along with other activists and intellectuals in the Caribbean, Red Thread believes the redistribution of resources to women is most likely to be facilitated by a democratic form of politics. Yet the recent legitimisation of the Guyanese state has proved insufficient to ensure that women can participate as full citizens in the development process. For the most part, political parties in the country have ignored the existence of Red Thread (and other NGOs) and its

agenda. Its role in the emerging civil society is limited, with political parties keeping decision-making power with respect to the allocation of national resources firmly within their control (see also Matear 1997 on Latin America). And while state harassment of an overt form is no longer an issue, both the PNC and PPP have effectively prevented funding from being channelled to Red Thread; it can safely be sidelined given its non-alliance to any political party.

The economic dependence of countries of the South compels women's organisations to make claims not only on the state but also on the global economic system and its regulatory institutions (Alvarez 1990). Since its inception Red Thread has been largely dependent on international funding sources, the constraints of which have not always allowed it to follow its own priorities. Numerous examples exist of multilateral agencies which, seeking to incorporate issues of 'good governance' and 'empowerment of civil society' into their 'adjustment with a human face' agendas, have sought out Red Thread and 'promised' support. They offer overseas experts to train Red Thread in the skills of institutional strengthening. Red Thread say 'what we need is core funding and a building before we do any institutional strengthening'. The inevitable response is that 'we cannot provide for administrative overheads'. The result is that development priorities become reversed, with the agenda of multilateral organisations, i.e. short-term projects, taking centre stage and all else needed to support the group in between projects being ignored.

At a time when multilateral agencies—one of the most powerful mechanisms for resource allocation—are recognising the need to take account of the social impact of SAPs and are engaging in discussions with groups within civil society, it might appear that a political space is being opened for feminist interpolations into the development process. However, the potential for doing this in the 1990s is contradictory. The restructuring of the international financial system in this period of SAPs may be taken in the North as evidence of increasing flexibility and liberalisation (see Slater 1992), but in the South, where the effects of the 'lost decade' of the 1980s are still palpably evident, the regulation imposed by multilateral agencies on women's organisations is viewed with increasing derision (de Souza 1996; Ford-Smith 1997).

Moreover, not all short-term projects are acceptable to multilateral agencies. As Honor Ford-Smith notes, any proposals to think beyond colonisations of women's minds and bodies (Alexander and Mohanty 1997) or cultural productions that may result in new meanings and representations are rarely acceptable; they do not produce values that can be measured.²⁰

Regulation is implemented in an effort to standardize and measure results in widely different situations. Issues around the specificity of cultures, the formation of identities, questions of race and language are not part of the development paradigm. Any view that considers the formation of subjects on their own terms is regarded as dangerous, not so much because it threatens large blocs of power (at present, it is

rare that such large claims can be made) but because it sets up confrontations with the everyday privileges that, in many cases, justify the labour of the development worker and his or her sense of power. (Ford-Smith 1997:229)

So long as Western knowledge (or 'expertise') defines what is known as development', the global (mal)distribution of power continues to sustain images of Southern groups as 'receivers' and Northern organisations as 'transmitters' of culture. Penalised for its non-involvement in the domestic party-political game, Red Thread also faces dominant Northern representations of Third World women—stereotyped as pre-modern, burdened by poverty, vulnerability and backwardness, without freedom or agency—which blind international funders to its transformatory potential. In its efforts to carve out new spaces and practices, resisting both sets of colonising tendencies is a critical condition for Red Thread's autonomy, but leaves it battling continuously for resources on both local and global fronts.

Formal and informal power(s): racialised and classed identities

Red Thread is neither the first nor the only current women's group purporting to represent women's interests in Guyana, but it is the only one to provide women with spaces—physical, social, analytical, political—denied them elsewhere in society. These spaces are the starting-point for understanding its concern with unscrambling the essentialist category of 'Third World women'. Red Thread does not, indeed cannot, operate on a founding assumption of a necessary or inherent similarity among women—a problem that has beset feminist organisations with simplistic appeals to sisterly solidarity. Nor, in the context of Guyana, was it possible to envisage or mobilise a politics of identity around gender unproblematically. In other words, given the legacy of a particular way of thinking about difference and the polarisation this has spawned in the country, it was clear that any politics of solidarity and similarity which came out of the discursive terrain of Guyanese politics would have to be based not on assumptions of ontology but on praxis, not on unreflexive appeals to gender but on a political choice to construct an explicitly and self-consciously feminist agenda. Gender, as the basis for social and political action, was not taken as given, but as something to be constructed across racialised divides. Nor for that matter could it be divorced from issues of class or abstracted from questions of materiality, driven home with force by the middle-class status of Red Thread's founders.²¹

The early interpersonal dynamics of Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women illustrated, in their spatial arrangements, the extent of the ideological barriers they had erected around each other; they did not sit together and Indo-Guyanese women tended not to talk except in low and inaudible voices. This started to break down, as Andaiye (1997) comments, '...when Indo- and Afro-Guyanese women found out about each other's lives [and] were amazed by

how little power they all had'. The long-term involvement of Red Thread members has undoubtedly facilitated the replacement of mistrust and stereotyping among women with differing ethnic and class identities with mutual understanding and respect (D.Radzik 1992). Yet creating subjectivities is a painstaking process when dealing with women who for so long have lived with little ongoing sense of entitlement. As Karen de Souza (1996) asserts,

It's taken a long time [about five years] to reach the stage where the women feel comfortable setting their own parameters. And reaching where we are now is probably a function of their exposure to other groups involved in development work. The sense that other people are trying to do the same thing is important to them. The impact of Sistren, for example, made the women more serious about educational work.

Despite their contingent nature, racialised identities have proved highly resistant to change as time and difficult experiences have revealed. Moreover, on leaving Red Thread most of the women return to segregated communities where it is possible to live without interacting on a daily basis with members of other racialised groups. Thus while working together has enabled women to grapple with difference, it is perhaps more accurate—and certainly less romantic—to suggest that racialised identifications are 'suspended' rather than transcended.

Such affiliations are, moreover, not fully 'suspended' even within Red Thread, highlighting what can be accomplished through continuous and committed interaction among members as well as the fact that this does not occur at all levels. While the working-class women, working intensively with each other, have been able to come together across racialised divides, the relative lack of sustained activities across class has meant that informal links between working-class and middle-class members tend largely to follow racialised lines. Across class divides, then, the challenging of racialised identities has also largely been taking place within racialised groups: Afro-Guyanese working-class members' mode of interaction has been questioned and interrogated by Afro-Guyanese middle-class women whereas working-class Indo-Guyanese women receive more critical attention from Indo-Guyanese middle-class women (Andaiye 1998). Significantly, such critique remains overwhelmingly uni-directional.

Indeed, it is class that has emerged as Red Thread's Achilles heel, and that defines relations between members of the group. Class has almost been accorded the status of a foundational category, existing on a pre-discursive terrain beyond the reach of any reconstruction (see Slater 1997). On its formation, the middle-class founders of Red Thread opposed entrenching themselves in formal leadership positions, not wanting to repeat the experience of cross-class women's organisations of the early twentieth century, in which middle-class women doled out charity to the deserving poor. Their 'fumbling' (Andaiye 1998) to get things right was evidenced in the name

changes they underwent (they initially adopted the name of the Women's Development Committee and when they changed this to Red Thread they became a Project and are currently a Programme) and particularly in the administrative problems they have encountered.

Class differences as they relate to education and experience of organising have contributed to internal organisational problems, and exemplify the informal workings of power even where conscious efforts are made to resist institutionalised hierarchy. Fulfilling agencies' requirements in relation to accounting administration requires skills that many of the women in the group do not have, intensifying hierarchies between those in the group who have good literary skills and those who do not. The small number of women in Red Thread gives the impression that a *laissez-faire* approach will work but in reality it is the middle-class women who still run the bulk of the funding and production process (V.Radzik 1991). As Peacocke (1995:13) asserts, 'The collective organising philosophy held by its founders encountered difficulties translating at the level of group self management.' Indeed, within Red Thread there are highly unequal divisions of labour, no clear structures of accountability and decision-making operates along unclearly demarcated channels.²² In the late 1980s attempts were made by working-class women in the embroidery groups to replace appointed organisers with elected ones. Elections were then incorporated into Red Thread's structure, but the desire by working-class women to have a hierarchical structure and clarify lines of authority was interpreted by the middle-class founders as an authoritarian tendency they did not want to encourage. Rather, the middle-class members preferred a flexible structure, to '...guard against the formation of bureaucratic and entrenched power-making bodies by ensuring that the decision making process was as democratic as possible and allowed for real participation' (D.Radzik 1992:13). Yet participation in Red Thread has not led to autonomy in the development of Red Thread groups. Radzik (1992) also found that working-class women in the teams felt they were too dependent on inputs from a few people, raising the issue of how to exercise authority and leadership in a democratic way.

This issue also brings us back to a 'politics of the possible'. Given that hierarchies do exist (indeed, we may ask whether they are inevitable), the question becomes one of ensuring accountability in the face of the formal and informal exercise of power. Although the aim of the original founders was to train working-class women to occupy the spaces that middle-class women currently dominate, there has been little assessment (and only one external evaluation) of the progress of women in the group and no attempt to ask the middle-class women what they have learned; their class and racialised identities have not been equally open for interrogation (see also Ford-Smith 1997; Imam 1997). There have been no ongoing discussions of how to 'do class differently'. Notwithstanding the fact that the majority of members are working-class women, public perceptions of the group remain largely based on its original core of middle-class founders. Most of the

middle-class women now work largely on their own, but while their shared history in a revolutionary praxis maintains their collective identity as members of Red Thread, it does not further the process of their own replacement. All based in Georgetown, they are the ones with standard English, high levels of education and connections with left-wing and women's organisations throughout the Caribbean and beyond. The working-class women regularly spend two to three hours to reach Georgetown, are rarely educated up to secondary school level, do not all speak standard English and had no history of organising prior to their involvement in Red Thread. They often face opprobrium in their communities for their involvement in the group, ranging from name-calling and labelling as lesbian or WPA supporters, to opposition from husbands.²³ As Williams posits, '...not all individuals have equal power to fix the co-ordinates of self-other identity formation. Nor are individuals equally empowered to opt out of the labelling process, to become the invisible other against which others' visibility is measured' (Williams 1989:420).

These tensions have produced Red Thread as an ambivalent place; while some boundaries are being opened up others remain closed (see Pile 1997). In this sense Red Thread is simultaneously a site of agency and solidarity and a site of difference and limitation where '...practices of resistance cannot be separated from practices of domination, they are always entangled in some configuration' (Routledge 1997:70). Despite the necessary unevenness in constructing democratic identities, Red Thread does provide a space where these entanglements are being consciously addressed, widening the gap between necessity and choice, the dialectic through which identities are constructed (Bammiker 1994). As this chapter has shown, there is no easy sisterly solidarity to be expected but rather the addressing of difference through continuous dialogue and praxis. As Andaiye (1997) comments,

What is the way of working together across differences? It is by recognising and confronting them organisationally. If women need autonomy from men to organise their power as women, so is it true that the experience of Red Thread is that perhaps working-class women need to meet autonomously so they can (re)join middle-class women with greater strength and power. To ignore difference is to make it fester. What autonomous sub-groups Red Thread should contain depends on what power differences are acting negatively.

While not denying the importance of organisational issues, perhaps it is the following comment by Karen de Souza (1996) which highlights Red Thread's transgressive potential: 'My involvement in the empowerment of someone else is to provide the space to let them do...whatever.' Such a way of thinking, by refusing closure, not only invites contestation of taken-for-granted hierarchies

of power, it also denies any essentialist privileging of Red Thread. As Trinh T. Minh-Ha comments,

The questions that arise continue to provoke answers, but none will dominate as long as the ground-clearing activity is at work...Can [knowledge] be conveyed without the exercise of power? No, because there is no end to understanding power relations which are rooted deep in the social nexus...Yes, however, because in-between grounds always exist...to render more visible the failures operating in every system.

(Minh-ha 1989:41)

Conclusion

What comes through this case-study, to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall (1995:4), is a 'tiny but important message'. Working under enormous constraints of economic dependence, political ostracism and a declining base of activists, the space for a counter-hegemonic politics is being created in which issues outside of race and party are being actively engaged. In aiming to contribute to a new political culture, one which involves thinking itself out of the spaces of domination, Red Thread aims to disentangle dominant notions of ethnicity and of politics from their 'equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state' (Hall 1992:257), the structures around which Guyanese identities have been forged (see Chapters Three and Four), and to articulate a new cultural politics which undermines the hegemony of racialised differences and is instead based upon a tolerance of difference and diversity.

Despite the many constraints working against Red Thread, the recognition that all discourses are incomplete, partial and never totally closed, implies the possibility for change. By generating and developing new practices of subject transformation, Red Thread is creating a node of empowerment, in which new ways of thinking—albeit slowly, albeit unevenly—are challenging hierarchies of identity, relations of exclusion and the development narratives of dominant groups. Red Thread's success is due to its ability to recognise the interdependence between the social, political and economic needs of women, the multiple and shifting relations of domination in their lives and its commitment to the painstaking process of women's self-empowerment. Despite the externally imposed and internally created limitations within which it operates (and of which it is aware), Red Thread, with its insistence on dialogues across differences, has ventured into areas untouched by other Guyanese women's organisations. Against the odds, being constantly sidelined and under-financed, it has remained in existence, its vision of Guyanese women working together to set the terms of struggle intact.

Notes

- 1 We take this phrase from Keith (1997:279): 'It is perhaps a salutary lesson...that a politics of the possible must inevitably emerge from a sustained engagement with the empirical, not a naïve romance of the real but instead a commitment to address the specific and particular.' This chapter draws on interviews with two members of Red Thread, Andaiye and Karen de Souza, as well as previous interviews recorded in Hart (1996), Peacocke (1995) and Radzik (1992). All names are those of the women interviewed.
- 2 It is widely accepted that an underlying principle of women's political empowerment is that of collective action (see Carr, Chen and Jhabvala 1996; Cubitt and Greenslade 1997; Dore 1997; Kabeer 1994; Radcliffe and Westwood 1993; Sen and Grown 1987).
- 3 The story of Charris illustrates this point. Charris is an Afro-Guyanese woman in her thirties, a market vendor turned domestic who occasionally has worked with Red Thread, a single parent with seven children who lives in a village outside Georgetown. She holds firmly to the common belief that hot and cold do not mix: to go from a hot house into a torrential rain, or to iron clothes and then have to leave the house during a rainfall, would invite a cold. Her employer became very frustrated by Charris' belief; during the rainy season she never seemed to get her clothes ironed. She offered to take Charris to the doctor who would explain to her that there was no medical foundation for her belief. Whether there was or not is not the point here; what was taking place was the reassertion of the superiority of Western ways of knowing, a discourse, moreover, that Charris was afraid to challenge for fear of losing her job.
- 4 Empowerment moves beyond Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) perspectives to engage directly with power relations and to insist on the imperative for priorities to be defined at the local level. However, there is no single or fixed approach to how women's empowerment should be achieved (Carr, Chan and Jhabvala 1996; Kabeer 1994; Moser 1993). It has recently achieved popular currency within the discourses of international agencies, albeit with radically different—and frequently regressive—implications.
- 5 Maxine Molyneux has in fact pointed out that her original use of practical/strategic interests was in relation to the Nicaraguan revolution, and (thus) that discussions must take account of subjective processes and 'be framed within specific historical contexts since processes of interest formation and articulation are clearly subject to cultural, historical and political variation and cannot be known in advance'. (Molyneux 1998:77). She also maintains that while the strategic/practical distinction is not useful if it results in a rigid binary, it remains an important heuristic device which distinguishes between an (always located) acceptance of the status quo and a feminist politics that 'depends on some measure of critical, alternative, thought and hence on some means of making value judgements about the social order' (p.78).
- 6 In relation to women's organisations, specific aims cannot be isolated from a broader context and seen as either/or (practical/strategic). Moreover, this framework runs the danger of assuming that it is the stereotypically 'low-income Third World women' who will move from practical (read traditional, passive, immediate, feminine) to strategic (read modern, activist, long-term, feminist) considerations. The stark contrast between the complex reality of women's lives and efforts to compress such experiences into neat and pre-arranged boxes was illustrated at a gender-planning workshop held in Georgetown and attended by working-class Red Thread members in the summer of 1991. The co-ordinator, a 'gender expert' from a regional organisation, provided a number of examples of hypothetical projects which she asked the women to sort into having 'practical' and 'strategic' aims. That this proved

- impossible for the women to do was a source of frustration for the workshop co-ordinator, who said it was the women who were getting it all wrong!
- 7 Yuval-Davis (1997) ascribes the origins of the term 'transversalism' to a strand of the Italian left, and draws on Italian feminists as well as the Women Against Fundamentalism movement to develop her position. Transversalism recognises diversity (as opposed to a hegemonic universalism) as well as connection and the imperative for a moral basis for politics (as opposed to a nihilistic relativism).
 - 8 These include ASCRIA (African Society for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa), IPRA (Indian Political Revolutionary Associates), Ratoon (a University of Guyana cultural and political organisation) and the WPVP (Working People's Vanguard Party) as well as independent members such as Andaiye, Walter Rodney and Rupert Roopnaraine. The group MAO (Movement Against Oppression) subsequently joined them.
 - 9 For such collective responses in Latin America, with which the Caribbean is so frequently, and sometimes spuriously, compared see Acosta-Belen and Bose 1993; Chinchilla 1993; Safa, 1990, 1992, 1995. The proliferation of women's organisations in Latin America has been linked to ongoing economic crisis, the suspension of democratic rights by authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, the disbanding of political parties and the subsequent politicisation of the community and private spheres (Alvarez 1990; Matear 1997).
 - 10 They are Andaiye, Jocelyn Dow, Bonita Harris, Vanda Radzik, Danuta Radzik, Karen de Souza and Dianne Matthews. All but the latter are still resident in Guyana and active to varying degrees in Red Thread. Within the context of a society in which women's political organisations are attached to political parties it has been extremely difficult for other groups not to perceive Red Thread as a WPA-based organisation, despite the fact that they draw their membership from women who support the PPP and PNC as well as the WPA.
 - 11 See Sen and Grown (1987:91) for a general discussion of such types of organisations. In Guyana Bonita Harris's (1995) report for CIDA on women's groups supported by the Canada Fund provides a good overview of such projects. The survey was of 14 women's groups, in at least 12 of which the initiative had come from a local man or men or from a parent organisation although women carried out the day-to-day work of the projects. The women participants listed what they considered to be the most important issues facing them in their villages: battering of women, withdrawal and shyness, lack of money, getting parents to send their children to classes, a drop in moral standards, discrimination and the inability to participate in community activity. These responses indicate that women do have a sense of what is important in their daily lives, yet not one of the groups' projects concerned itself with '...leadership training, consciousness raising, child and adolescent development, female poverty, domestic violence, rape, suicide, incest or sex education, alcohol and other drug abuse, economic education or information on the status of women in other countries' (1995:9). All addressed only small-scale income-generating projects in cooking (but not nutrition), sewing, embroidery, shorthand and typing, crochet and cake decoration, English and maths classes. The projects were riddled with a variety of problems. The participants were often referred to as 'the children' by the volunteer teachers, reinforcing the relations of deference and obedience that characterise both male-female and child-adult relationships. Four of the organisers cited political interference with their projects. It was not documented how many women had gained employment from participating in these projects, though all training provided would have led to employment in low-paid jobs. Most problematically, all the projects relied on voluntary female labour for organising and teaching. Not only did this sustain the notion of women's work as something they

- did in their spare time, but it also led to only a short period of time every week being devoted to project activities. Sustainability was obviously an issue. Although these projects have not led to any difference in women's position in their communities they were making possible, albeit unintentionally, the development of Indo-Guyanese women leaders by putting them in a position to acquire the organisational and intellectual tools to exercise leadership in their own affairs. But usually uncoordinated and under-financed, peripheral to planning programmes, focusing only on traditional skills, with little capacity to expand or promote replicability, these projects focus on what can be counted and have only a rhetoric of participatory development. Most importantly, they tend to have no vision, having no history of organisation outside of the project being implemented.
- 12 They are Janet Jagan, widow of Cheddi Jagan, and the current President; the Minister of Youth and Culture, Gail Teixeira; and Indra Chandrapaul, Minister of Women's Affairs in the Ministry of Housing.
 - 13 In an attempt to reassess their relationship to the PNC they no longer seek approval from the party for their projects (although these are now largely restricted to helping groups of women prepare funding requests and occasional symposia on leadership skills) and their members are not automatically expected to campaign at election times. They are also willing to work with groups that do not support the PNC, although technically the PNC still speaks for them (Johnson 1996).
 - 14 Red Thread successfully produced 37,000 exercise books before the project was taken out of its hands after the Ministry of Education applied to CIDA for a grant to produce exercise books and the project was transferred to them, including funds to produce 10 million books (Peacocke 1995).
 - 15 Initially the women spent three weeks learning about research methodologies, social survey design, questionnaire construction and interviewing techniques. In the following ten-week period they successfully completed the survey as well as in-depth interviews which they then transcribed. Since then they have received five more training sessions on research methodologies for which they secured funding from Linda Peake and the Canadian High Commission in Guyana. They have also been employed on five separate projects as survey interviewers for independent researchers, the University of Guyana and for Region Four Democratic Council Youth Section, a Caribbean-wide research project on sex workers and a national survey on domestic violence.
 - 16 The Health Team has received training from Dr. Nesha Haniff, a non-resident Red Thread member.
 - 17 Working with coastal Arawak women in St Cuthbert's Mission, Red Thread established a project to grow alternative grasses to *nibbi*, the grass traditionally used to make furniture and baskets, supplies of which are rapidly being depleted. Concern with the environment has also led to joining demonstrations against the Canadian-owned gold-mining company, Omai, which was responsible in 1995 for a major cyanide spill.
 - 18 This is not to deny that friendships and connections exist between individual women among women from these organisations. For further insight into the personal relations between women in these political organisations see Kilkenny 1984; Hart 1996; V.Radzik 1997.
 - 19 At the national level these links include the following: the Women's Studies Unit and the Environmental Studies Unit, University of Guyana; the Women's Affairs Bureau; Help and Shelter and GOSED, the Baha'i Women's Council. At the regional level they include: CAFRA (Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action); the Sistren Theatre Collective, Jamaica; WAND (Women and Development Unit), University of the West Indies; the Association of Development Agencies, Jamaica;

CARIPEDA (Caribbean People's Development Association); CCC (Caribbean Conservation Agency); CNIRD (Caribbean Network for Integrated Rural Development); and CPDC (Caribbean Policy Development Centre). At the international level they include: WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organisation); DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era); and the British-based Counting Women's Work Campaign. Red Thread women also participated in the Beijing process, while Andaiye was responsible for writing the Post-Beijing Plan of Action for Women in the Caribbean. Another member, Jocelyn Dow, has recently been appointed to the External Gender Consultative Group of the World Bank and sits on the board of WEDO. Red Thread has also played key roles through its representatives at major UN conferences such as the Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro, 1992); the Global Conference on Small Island Developing States (Barbados, 1994); the Social Summit (Copenhagen, 1995); and the Global Women's Conference (Beijing, 1995). It also represented Guyana at both the first and second Commonwealth NGO Fora held in Zimbabwe and New Zealand respectively.

20 As Ford-Smith elaborates (1997:227):

Although the policies of development agencies vary widely, in general, those funding the activities of NGOs involved with women can be said to have three criteria: a) the production of a multiplier effect; b) a direct influence on a grassroots target group; c) the achievement of some kind of measurable 'improvement' in a given situation in relation to a particular problem (usually determined by the donor agency).

- 21 Other axes of difference—of religion and political affiliation—exist among the women in Red Thread, but these are seen as issues of personal preference and do not enter into Red Thread discourses on a daily basis. A lack of impetus and fissures among the middle-class members and its non-consideration by working-class members appear to make sexuality a non-issue, although bringing such an issue into the public sphere would be 'political dynamite' (Matear 1997) in the intensely homophobic atmosphere of Guyana.
- 22 Although as recently as 1992 Red Thread held an annual encounter of all its members, had an administrative and policy-determining Resource Unit and an elected Co-ordinating Committee as well as the work teams (D.Radzik 1992).
- 23 To be labelled a WPA supporter is to indicate that someone has transgressed their racialised identity in failing to vote along racialised party lines.

CONCLUSION

We briefly conclude this book by returning to consider our main concerns. Our aims have been to analyse how the reproduction of racialised identities relies on gendered practices and representations, to show the heterogeneous and overlapping experiences of groups considered separate, to explore how discourses of ethnicity involve silences around inequalities such as gender, sexuality and class that women may share across such divisions, and to examine the conditions under which women may become the sites of a critical femininity.

Our examination of both historical and contemporary periods highlights the temporal and spatial fluidity of identity formation. The alleged boundaries where identities are played out are, in practice, continually cross-cut. Boundaries are themselves multifarious—discourse between and within various groups holding out different images and ideals of what it means to be a woman. These are discourses moreover in which women are not just innocently or passively accepting the imposition of norms, but refashioning them in ways—albeit uneven and contradictory—that value themselves.

Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women are the product, then, of specific but also interlocking histories and geographies. Moreover this is not a scenario of pluralism, of the—innocent—differences across cultures, because it cannot be divorced from power and the wider historical and contemporary politics of racialisation. Nor are these tensions only reducible to differences *between* individuals (e.g. older vs. younger, urban vs. rural, employed vs. unemployed) but are located *within* embodied individuals. Specifically, our concern here has been to disturb and re-vision taken-for-granted notions of how women in each ‘group’ represent themselves and of the different meanings women attach to the practices in which they engage.

The variations we have found across the three communities we have worked in also suggest that the historical emergence of each place, and the nature of its contemporary insertion into the economy and the national imaginary, shape women’s relationships to economic and social institutions—such as the labour market and the household—in specific ways. What it means to be an Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese woman is therefore not

independent of the places through which these identities are negotiated and produced. At the same time these identities, while place-based, are not place-bound. In many ways the changing social, geographical and cultural landscapes that Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese women face in the process of reproducing racialised group identities are occasioning growing similarities in the quotidian practices of daily life as each community grapples with the effects of global restructuring. Rapid structural transformation has both increased women's involvement in the labour market—primarily as informal sector workers—and intensified their unpaid work in the domestic domain. Yet, notwithstanding the convergence in social practices, racialised identities demonstrate immense durability and resistance to change. This is not to say that the rules do not change or are non-negotiable, but that they remain intelligible as racialised solidarities and contractual obligations.

It is important to acknowledge that our own closures in this text do not permit us to capture the full range and fluidity of social identities. To begin with, our fieldwork sites are all in the county of Demerara, in the capital city or within a few hours travelling distance from it. The variations we have found even within this relatively small radius only underline the importance of contextually based research. And while we have deliberately chosen to enter into a dialogue around racialisation in an effort to interrogate the production of identities as natural, we are only too aware that in restricting ourselves to a study of Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese, the two numerically dominant groups, we have excluded other Guyanese women, Amerindian women especially. Our attempt to disentangle the 'relational connectedness' of gender and ethnicity, while not foreclosing other axes of differentiation such as age, class, and the construction of masculinities, has also not allowed them to be systematically addressed throughout the book. That we have not entered into an extended discussion around religion is a final reminder of the provisionality of our findings, for it both constitutes women as subordinate partners within the family of man, and offers a symbolic and physical space in which women commonly find solace, advice and an occasion to re-value themselves. This book then is not intended as the final word on the construction of Guyanese women's identities, but rather as a small contribution to an ongoing conversation within Guyana and the Caribbean and between North and South.

We wish to close by reflecting on the implications for the building of a democratic politics, of this tension between fluid and hybrid practices on the one hand, and the resilience of racialised identities on the other. In the opening chapters of this text we acknowledged how we are ourselves positioned within discourses even as we attempt to work against the grain. Bearing in mind that, in our interest in examining the interface between gender and ethnicity, the very act of naming Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women also invests these categories with further representational power, we have sought not to reproduce the very identities we set out to question, including our own. Nor, as Chapter Two discusses, did this stem from an *a*

priori rejection of the stability of such categories, but was rather the result of lessons learned, sometimes painfully, in the field. At the same time it is crucially important to acknowledge our own limits within the text, since 'it is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed *theoretically*, therefore, it has been displaced *politically*' (Hall 1996:249; see also Dirlik 1997).

The pertinence of this cautionary note is reinforced by recent events taking place in Guyana as this book nears completion. The December 1997 elections failed to shift the racialised gridlock that has characterised voting patterns and confirmed the occupation of political centre stage by the PNC and PPP. The results, which returned the PPP to power, were rejected amidst allegations of irregularities by the PNC and other political parties. In the face of demonstrations in Georgetown, a Mission was appointed by the Caribbean Community (Caricom) to conduct an independent audit of the elections and examine the issue of constitutional reform. The audit results have been interpreted differently by the PPP and PNC. The PNC, remaining out of parliament, re-engaged in street protests, leading to a further intervention by Caricom officials. Although the PNC returned to parliament in July 1998, the political impasse remains unresolved, and there is growing disillusion among the vast majority of the population, who continue to face the unrelenting daily hardship that has accompanied the structural adjustment policies of the 1990s.

The current political crisis in Guyana highlights the seeming intransigence of racialised certainties and affiliations, as well as their consequences. For example, in the January demonstrations following the announcement of the election results, women were used by some as representative of ethnic identity, a move that claimed a certain type of (comm)unity which, as we have argued, exists only on the basis of eliding inequalities of gender. In the demonstrations that followed the election results, local newspapers reported that a number of Indo-Guyanese women in Georgetown were stripped and beaten by Afro-Guyanese, eliciting a stream of letters to the editors. Some letters pointed out that Afro-Guyanese women were also the target of attack by members of the police force for making their opposition to the PPP public. The vast majority of these letters used the opportunity to allege and deny responsibility on the part of the entire 'Indo-Guyanese' or 'Afro-Guyanese' community; meanwhile the actual violence inflicted on the bodies of 'real' women was sidelined (Andaiye 1998).

This crisis also underlines the urgent necessity of challenging a political status quo that continues to reap the benefits of racialised identities being positioned in a fixed and oppositional manner, with all other conversations assuming secondary (if any) importance, for it is particularly in times of political tension that the power of representation of 'self' and 'other' increase. That women also locate and recognise themselves as racialised subjects highlights the blind spots of any feminist project that fails to grapple with how power works through forms of difference other than gender. The displacement of dominant narratives based on ontological identity claims requires collective

efforts to carve out new spaces in civil society which, as Angela Davis succinctly notes, ground 'the identities on politics rather than the politics on identity' (Davis 1997:318).¹ The specific issues raised by the work of Red Thread in Guyana, for example, throw into relief the questions posed for feminist praxis more generally, regarding the potential for a gender-based politics when the very category of 'woman' itself is no longer (if it ever was) a viable one. The indeterminacy of subject-positions, far from being cause for despair, can—indeed should—constitute the point of departure, and become the foundation of an enabling political vision. Foregrounding differences (within and between women) while remaining committed to working against the colonial and contemporary legacy of racialised certainties that have framed their emergence and representation, Red Thread works towards, and not from, a shared gender consciousness.

But this is no easy task: both external and internal constraints and contradictions belie any simple solutions. Seeking to make explicit the 'relational connectedness' of women's work in the home and the labour market, the local and the global, the 'self' and 'other', is to find oneself battling international restructuring, attempts to marginalise one's efforts locally, and a developmental mind set which treats gender as a simplistic and quantifiable category (and only belatedly recognised the input of women, albeit to make the market more efficient rather than to challenge development itself). The multifaceted fronts upon which such activities are played out also impress upon us the need not for isolated but rather interconnected struggles.

Internally, the example of Red Thread also highlights the importance of recognising and confronting the privileged subject-positions of members in relation to each other, although the process has been somewhat uneven; while the group has been relatively vigilant in relation to racialised identities, other (related) questions of class privilege have been less successfully tackled, with others (particularly sexuality) remaining as yet largely unremarked. The difficult challenges Red Thread faces in its ongoing efforts to expand the political imaginary remind us that in the struggle to interrupt dominant narratives, to trace the linkages across seemingly disconnected spaces and to challenge the relations of domination through which they operate, it is imperative that we do not place our gendered and racialised selves outside of or beyond interrogation.

Notes

- 1 And while it is undeniably the case that, close up and at this juncture, the obstacles seem unsurmountable, the existence of groups and individuals committed to a multiracial future cannot be overlooked or dismissed as some academics have tried to do. Ralph Premdas, for example, has suggested that Guyana is 'finished' and that without third-party intervention genocide or partition could be possible tragic outcomes (see *Trinidad Guardian*, 6 March 1998; *Guyana Stabroek News*, 27 March 1998).

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INDEX

- abortion 57, 162–3
ANDA 22
AWSG 21
adultery 83, 142, 144, 147
age 199; at marriage 86, 90–1; of survey
populations 70; *see also* employment
agency 14
Albouystown 14, 21–6, 34–7, 69, 70–4, 75, 76–
82, 153, 155–71
Amerindian(s) 10, 40, 74; education 67;
employment 67; land rights 56; location of
7, 52, 59; nations 51; poverty 59, 60, 67
Andaiye 179, 189, 192
Anthias, F. 4–5
Appadurai, A. 102, 103, 104, 114, 118, 123

bauxite 7, 15, 48, 54, 69, 130, 134
Beckles, H. 128
Berbice 40, 41
body/bodies 3; and dress 95, 101
Booker Tate 103, 123, 124
Bourque, N. 82
Boyce-Davies, C. 27
Brana Shute 151
British Guiana 29, 40
Brydon, L. 13

CAFRA 17
Callaway, H. 33
Caribbean 3, 7, 11–13
Chant, S. 13
Chinese 10, 34, 52, 74
class 9, 85, 96–7, 108, 128; identities 13, 36;
middle-class 85, 190–2; within Red Thread
190–2; working-class 13, 108, 137–8, 190–2,
199; *see also* marriage
common-law union 68, 71, 86–7, 90, 139, 142–
3
consumer durables 114
co-operative socialism 54–6

de Souza, K. 190, 192
Davis, A. 201
decision-making 15; and basic expenses
159; and disposal of earnings 159; and
major purchases 161; and family planning
162–3
Demba Company 127, 130, 134–7, 149, 151
Demerara 7, 40, 41
democratic practices 2, 15, 199
discourses 2, 14, 198; domesticity 14, 111, 136;
gender 3, 77; households 153–4; kinship
flows 14; nationalist 56–60; paid work 14;
place 89; racialised ethnic 3, 11, 77;
respectability 97, 101, sexuality 14
domestic domain/life 6, 48, 116; *see also*
femininity, household, spaces
domestic violence 15, 147, 153, 173;
employment 170; indentureship 43;
kinship networks 171; laws 57, 58; Red
Thread 183; responses 169–71; services 59,
183; social networks 168–71
domesticity: men and 141; women and 12, 77,
84–7, 91, 111, 136, 137, 144; *see also*
discourses, motherhood, spaces
*dougl*a 10–11

ERP 56
education 57, 68, 92, 113, 152; under
colonialism 47
employment 14; and Afro-Guyanese women
46–7; and age 62, 75, 125; and differences
between Afro-Guyanese and Indo-
Guyanese women 62–3, 65–7, 73, 100; and
gender 61, 64–5, 73–4, 84; and Indo-
Guyanese women 47–8; employment
(*continued*) and households 155–8; and
mothering 88–93; characteristics of survey
population 71–4; definitions of 60, 62, 69–
70; from colonialism to independence 45–
50; in Albouystown 84, 86, 88, 91–2; in

- Linden 134, 137–8; in Meten Meer Zorg East 110–11; informal 46, 63–4, 72, 81, 100; legislation on 57–8; women's current 60–7; *see also* labour markets
- empowerment 174–6, 194
- Essequibo 7, 40, 41
- ethnicity: and class 13, 36, 96–7; constructions of 96; definition 3–6, 16; discourse 3; and households 155; and gender 4–5, 11, 13, 77; inter-ethnic networks 93; and kinship 5, 13, 76; and the labour market 65–7; perceptions of 35; and politics 60; 'plural society' 9; privileging of 36; and 'race' 4; racialised discourses of 3, 11; representations of 153; sexuality 13; social networks 166–8; *see also* racialisation
- family: life 13; legislation on 57; size 162–3; under indentureship 43, 48–50; under slavery 41–2; and work after slavery 48–9; and work after indentureship 49–50; *see also* kinship
- fatherhood 142
- femininity 134–7, 137–49, 160; norms of 138–44; practices of 144–8
- feminist research 20, 39; in the Caribbean 12, 17
- fertility 14, 41, 67–8
- Ford-Smith, H. 188, 197
- GAD 181
- gender 3–6, 36, 76–7, 149, 153; *see also* employment, ethnicity, labour market, masculinity, racialisation, spaces, stereotypes, women
- Georgetown 14, 21, 45, 76, 77, 99, 100, 115, 117, 119
- globalisation 1, 15, 102–5
- Guyana 1, 7–11; and Independence 54
- Guysuco 123, 124
- habitus 102–5, 110, 122; spatialising the habitus 115–22
- Hall, S. 89, 103, 193
- Haraway, D. 32
- Harley, J.B. 32
- Harris, B. 181, 182
- Harris, Wilson 8, 9
- Harvey, D. 14, 116
- Hill Collins, P. 5, 15
- homophobia 143, 144
- household 3, 6; characteristics of survey 70–4; conjugal unit 13; and ethnicity 155; studies of 76, 15 3–5; definition of 69–70; decision-making 153, 158–9; expenditure 153, 159, 161–2, 173; extended 70, 166; extra household transfers 156; female-headed 13, 48, 49, 70–1, 93, 166; fertility 67–8; fluidity of 154–5; patriarchal 13; studies of 12; under slavery 42; under indentureship 43; *see also* kinship
- housework 15, 111, 148, 153, 163–6
- hooks, b. 15, 38
- hybrid 10, 96
- IMF 74
- identities 27, 76; Afro-Guyanese women 2, 40, 50, 93–9; as mothers 54, 58, 82–93; and domesticity 91; classed 189–93; constructions of 14, 76; gendered 2, 4, 37, 93, 111, 119, 122, 127, 153; Indo-Guyanese women 2, 40, 50, 93–9; material aspects of 3; place and 6, 76, 116, 122; racialised ethnic 2, 4, 11, 26, 36–7, 47, 60, 62, 65–7, 76, 98, 119, 122, 153, 189–93, 201; Red Thread 189–93; representations of 2, 43, 45, 51; sites of identity formation 3
- imaginary: European 1; globalisation of 102–5; masculine 129; social 15
- income 15; access to 155–8; income groups 2–3, 13, 85; *see also* poverty, savings
- indentured labour 2, 9, 40, 44–5, 47, 51, 90, 102
- indentureship 51; and women 42–3, 45, 47, 52
- Independence 7, 45, 60
- 'insider-outsider' divide 14, 20, 89; and research methods 34–7
- Jenkins 115
- Jonestown 7
- Kabeer, N. 154, 180
- Katz, C. 6, 16
- Keith, M. 194
- kinship 3, 5, 12, 13; and racialised identities 169; networks 82, 85, 92, 108, 156, 165–7, 168–71, 174; studies of 12, 85; *see also* household
- labour market 3, 85, 89, 91, 198; racialisation 45, 65–7, 121–2; women's experiences of 61–2; *see also* employment
- Lancaster, R. 129
- Lefebvre, H. 1, 6
- legislation 14
- lesbians 74, 144, 151
- Lewis 130

- Linden 15, 22–6, 69, 70–4, 127, 130–4, 137, 153, 155–71
 Linmine 132
- McClenaghan, S. 63
 malnutrition 59
- maps: and power 29–34; of Albouystown 78; of Guyana 29; of Linden 131; of Meten Meer Zorg East 106
- marriage: and class 42, 48–9, 94; and difference 27; and fertility 67–8; and laws 52, 57, 87; and religion 42, 43, 86, 87, 100, 108; and respectability 48, 52, 101, 139; arranged 52, 86, 90–1; characteristics of survey populations 71; Hindu 43, 52, 75, 90, 100, 108; in Albouystown 85–98; in Linden 139–40; in Meten Meer Zorg East 108; and Indo-Guyanese identity 44, 50, 86, 91, 94, 108, 125–6; inter-religious 86, 108, 115; inter-ethnic 51, 86, 100; Muslim 43, 52, 75, 91, 100, 108; under indentureship 42, 43, 48–9; under slavery 42
- masculinity 77, 199; and racilisation 77, 128; and slavery 128; construction of 83, 128–30, 134–7, 160; liming 130, 141, 150; norms of 138–44; practices of 144–9
- Massey, D. 6, 103, 123
- methodology 20–6
- Meten Meer Zorg East 15, 20–6, 29, 32–3, 69, 70–4, 102, 105–8, 153, 155–71
- migration: after indentureship 44, 89; after slavery 48; from Meten Meer Zorg East 111–13, 118–19; men and 48, 134, 139; overseas 55, 103, 111–13, 115, 119, 125; remittances 112, 119, 156; rural-urban 45–6, 48, 80, 99, 134; to Linden 144; transnational family 9; women and 58–9, 102
- Miles, A. 15
- Miller, D. 94, 104, 116, 123, 124, 126, 144
- Minh-Ha, T. 90, 193
- mobility 115; gendered differences in 92, 120–1, 146–7
- Mohanty, C.T. 2
- Mohapatra, P. 43
- Molyneux, M. 194
- monetarisation 102, 113–14
- mothering/motherhood: and difference 84–5; and employment 158; and female identity 82–3, 160; indentureship 43; and slavery 41–2, 67–8, 82–9, 139, 160–2, 168, 172; status of 139
- Moore, H. 89
- Mosse, J. 128
- movement 120–1, 143, 146–7; metaphorisation of 115
- NCW 180, 184
- nuclear family 12, 70
- PAC 53
- PNC 10, 34, 54, 74, 82, 89, 168, 178, 179, 188, 196, 200
- PPP 10, 53–6, 168, 177, 188, 200
- Paravasi-Gebert, L. 179
- Parry, C. 152
- Peacocke, N. 187, 191
- place 6, 153, 171–3; and poverty 80–1; representations of 81; *see also* identities
- plantation system 41
- plural society 9, 11, 13
- plurality 10
- politics: and community life 82, 166, 168; demonstrations 200; and elections 54, 74, 200; and racialised voting 17, 54, 60, 150, 200; under colonial rule 53–4; in the post-Independence era 54–6; *see also* women
- Portuguese 9, 17, 74
- post-colonialism 16
- poverty 16, 124, 181, 187; in Albouystown 34–5, 80–1; Amerindians 59, 60, 67; and illness 59; in Linden 130, 132; in Meten Meer Zorg East 107; structural adjustment 56; *see also* income, resources
- Pratt, G. 20
- race 3–6, 34, 137; definition 4
- racialisation: and colonialism 4, 17, 40–52; and ethnicity 4, 16; and differences 2, 4, 10, 11, 15, 98–9; and households 6; and gender 3–6, 93–8, 119; and labour market 65–7, 121–2; and naming 26–7, 38; and nationalist discourses 122, 129, 185; definition 15; of political parties 55; politics of 11; racism 5; and space 116, 119; *see also* ethnicity, women
- Radzik, D. 191
- Red Thread Research Team 22, 29, 30, 183, 196
- Red Thread Women's Development Programme 17; activities of 181–4; aims of 184; Amerindian women 184;
- Red Thread WDP (*continued*) classed identities 189–93; democracy 181–2; domestic violence 183–4; education 182–3; embroidery 181; feminist praxis 3, 15, 34, 37, 201; formation of 60, 174, 179; funding

- 187–9; history of 181–4; income-generation 181–2; internal organisation 185–7; links with 196–7; members in 39, 117, 119, 179, 195; racialised identities 189–93; research 29; sexuality 197; spaces of 184–5; structural adjustment 188
- reflexivity 29–37
- relational connectedness 5, 199
- remittances, *see* migration
- representation: authorial 20, 26, 28; of identities 2, 43, 45, 51, 153; of indentured women 43, 45; of spaces 89; of slave women 43, 45; political 20
- resources 153, 155–8, 158–63, 171; material and symbolic 15
- respectability 97, 101, 147
- Rodney, W. 1, 38
- Routledge, P. 192
- Rubenstein, H. 168
- rural areas: and women's employment 46, 63; *see also* Meten Meer Zorg East
- saving 91, 160–2; boxhand 161; pennybank 161
- sexual activity 140–1
- sexuality 3, 4, 12, 127, 137, 138, 143, 146, 149; heterosexuality 15, 83, 129, 143, 144, 150; homosexuality 74, 129, 143, 144, 150, 151, 165
- Shahabuddeen, M. 134
- Sharma, U. 159
- SIMAP 56, 156
- Sistren Theatre Collective 17, 183
- slave labour 2, 9, 51
- slavery 40, 41, 128; and women 41–2, 45, 46, 47; abolition of 42
- Smith, N. 6, 16
- Smith, R.T. 53, 97
- social networks 15, 91, 93, 153; ethnicity 166–8; and domestic violence 168–71; *see also* kinship
- South America 1, 7
- spaces: definition 6, 16; domestic 91; female 83, 115–16; household 155; male 83, 115–16; private and public 59, 83–5, 89, 115–16, 129–30; *see also* racialisation, Red Thread 184–5
- stereotypes: among women 94–6, 98; colonial 51; fluidity 45; racialised 66, 82; Third World women 2; women workers 91
- structural adjustment 4, 74; bauxite industry 129, 150; flows of capital and 103, 188; gender 163, 184; in Guyana 56, 179; public and private spaces 59; sugar industry 110, 122; women's employment 63, 64, 199; *see also* poverty
- state: benefits 156; colonial state 43, 45, 50; employment for women 62–3
- sugar 7, 15, 54, 69, 102, 122–3; estate of Uitvlugt 105, 108, 123, 124
- survey populations 20–6, 70–4
- Third World women 2, 28, 39
- Thomas, C.Y. 123, 124, 126
- transversal politics 175, 195
- UF 54
- urban areas: and women's employment 46–8, 63; *see also* Albouystown, Georgetown and Linden
- village movement 44
- visiting union 75, 86–90, 93, 139, 142; definition 67
- WAD 180, 194
- WICP 12, 17
- WID 181, 194
- WPA 21, 55, 60, 178, 179, 197
- WPEO 177
- WPO 177, 178, 180, 184
- WRSM 177, 178, 180
- Weyland 103
- Williams, B. 43, 77, 128, 151, 192
- White, S. 90, 98
- women: and self-empowerment 174; Afro-Caribbean 13, 36; Indo-Caribbean 13, 36; Afro-Guyanese 2, 11, 35, 36, 48, 62, 76–101, 198–9; Amerindian women 59, 67, 74, 184, 196; and employment 60–7; and racialised identity 2, 62, 65–7; and indentureship 42–3; and politics 58, 176–80; and slavery 41–2; Chinese 74; Indo-Guyanese 2, 11, 35, 36, 62, 76–101, 102–23, 198–9; legal status of 56–8; Portuguese 74; status of 56–60; *see also* employment, fertility, household, motherhood, poverty, work
- Wood, D. 30
- work: women's work under indentureship 43, 45; women's work under slavery 41, 45; *see also* employment, labour market
- Yuval-Davis, N. 4–5