The Commonwealth Caribbean Women’s Movement in a Post-Colonial Mould: A Route Back to Conscience

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ABSTRACT

Women in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean have always organised to oppose and change their circumstances. Given the prevalence of misogyny and patriarchy in colonial and postcolonial societies, this resistance is especially important. Women’s activism has primarily been labelled as “feminism,” but this paper contends that this is not historically accurate. While feminism provided a language and an international platform for Caribbean women’s work, it was ineffective in providing a framework for addressing community-based organising. The paper employs Eusi Kwayana’s concept of “conscience” as a more appropriate philosophical anchor for Caribbean activism. Conscience is a philosophical marker that connects Andaiye’s work to a broader Afro-Caribbean approach to navigating life in postcolonial societies affected by the relics of slave plantation economy and social structures. This orientation runs counter to the Western definition of feminism, and Caribbean women should be wary of the ways such concepts impede their ability to organise themselves meaningfully.

Keywords: Women’s leadership, postcolonial women’s organizing, Commonwealth Caribbean Intellectual History.

INTRODUCTION

Despite all of our efforts as activists engaged in women’s organising in Commonwealth Caribbean spaces, we still lack a coherent organisational principle. This article uses existing literature on pre-nationalist women’s organising (1930s-1979) to make sense of current observations about women’s organising strengths and weaknesses. I contend that feminism lacks the philosophical diversity needed to provide an adequate foundation for women’s organising in post-colonial societies deprived of critical resources and still fighting off the remnants of slave plantation social orders. In the same way that Patricia Collins examines the experiences of Black women in America in Black Feminist Thought and Rafia Zakaria reflects on ‘othered’ women in Against White Feminism, I examine the experiences of Commonwealth Caribbean women with feminism.

The article begins with a methodological approach and concept definitions. Following that is a brief history of women’s organising in the Caribbean. Finally, I investigate the concept of conscience and its potential application in women’s organising. This is one of two papers in which I reflect on the philosophical assumptions underlying women’s organising in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean, as well as how those assumptions inform praxis. One major goal is to break the habit of academics and consultants speaking on behalf of Caribbean women rather than with them. As a result, the ideas presented in this paper must be supported by empirical research and interaction with women in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean. Therefore, in lieu of a conclusion, I suggest the way forward.

METHOD AND DEFINITIONS

The phrase ‘women’s organizing’ in this paper is used as an overarching term for all the types of ways that Commonwealth Caribbean women have sought to arrange themselves and create strategies and actions to alleviate social injustice in their lives. The term is broad and acknowledges that even women living on plantations would have created resistance strategies as Beckles (1989, pp. 152-174) and Moitt (2001, pp. 125-150) show. Women’s organizing subsumes feminist organizing which would have become popular paralleling the international trends of the 1960s and 1970s. Subsuming feminist approaches to advocacy and
activism in a broader movement is an important correction in the history of the Caribbean women’s movement. It removes focus from Western methodologies and allows analysis of the way that women have addressed their realities in the Caribbean based on their experiences of living in post-colonial societies characterized by poverty and economic instability. This is important because as much energy as Caribbean women have put into concerns ranging from matters that affect their children’s lives to the types of violence that affect women disproportionately, to getting more women into positions of public influence, they have also played critical roles in securing independence for the Commonwealth Caribbean and building the political framework for black self-determination and self-governance. In seeking alternatives to feminism, the paper does not premium theory as the obvious and most useful place to find solutions. I believe that while feminism was useful for theorizing meta concepts of women’s oppression, it has flaws – such as its inability to reconcile class and race privilege that render it useless in the Commonwealth Caribbean region.

Over-reliance on (Western) theory has resulted in obfuscation of the needs of Commonwealth Caribbean people. The use of theory that is constructed by western interests for western intentions has left our region striving to reach ill fitted benchmarks and seemingly dysfunctional. In turning back that approach to finding solutions to problems, I invoke the importance of the experience of the foremothers in the Caribbean who have invested time, intellectual and organizing capacity in women’s activism. I distinguish activism from theorizing and signal that feminism has been a more useful tool for women who have written about women’s concerns as an academic endeavour than it has been for activists – the field workers of the movement who needed not just to exist on the plantation1 under grueling and unequal power relations but who sought to topple the plantation and supplant it with more sensible and equitable structures. By using experiences from foremothers in the women’s movement we can cultivate critical lessons and takeaways that might shape future efforts. I hope to engage in what Canadian researcher, Kathleen Gallagher encourages - engaging in creating space for new understanding by, “…placing a frame of significance around something that demands our attention” (Gallagher, 2008, p. 2). This paper specifically examines the contribution of Andaiye. She is a Guyanese born, foremost critical thinker, left and women’s organizer between the 1960s and 2019, when she transitioned to the ancestral realm. Eusi Kwayana’s description of Andaiye as the conscience of Guyana opens an interesting space in which to create an indigenous and applicable philosophical mooring upon which the praxis2 of women’s organizing can be set down.

**Women’s Organizing in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean**

The Commonwealth Caribbean is located in the global south. The two major features of that positioning which affect every aspect of the lives of all citizens of this region - but for the purpose of this paper - its women and girls, are the remnants of the plantation system and the Transatlantic trade in Africans as slaves. This paper examines the Commonwealth Caribbean as a sub-region of the global south with a shared experience of British colonialism and similar self-determination struggles between the 1930s and 1979. Although the West Indies Federation comprising these territories failed in 1962, a free trade area and eventually CARICOM were established shortly after. Despite differences worth note, and the importance of individual analysis, historians and other intellectual (Brereton, 2004, p. 1), (Knight, 2012, pp. ix-x), (Mohammed, 1998, p. 1), (Hinds, 2019, p. 3) do treat the Commonwealth Caribbean as a singular region. For the purposes of this paper, the shared history and collaboration of women’s organizing efforts merit the region being taken together. The paper may refer more to Barbados in parts because that was the main site of twenty-two years of my work and where I continue to practice3.

The Transatlantic trade in Africans enslaved and the resulting systems of capitalism, colonialism and neocolonialism have persisted and impacted the lives and livelihoods of generations of Black people. Many Caribbean intellectuals have explored various effects of slavery on the extraction area, Africa and the receiving areas, including various territories of the Caribbean and other places such as North America and Britain that now house large African Diasporic communities. Eric Williams, for example in *Capitalism and Slavery* and Llyod Best have developed economic models of the Commonwealth Caribbean that show the legacy of plantation organizing both as enduring economic and social relics. Deborah Thomas’ *In the Wake of the Plantation* is a recent analysis of the ways that plantation societies obstruct the rights of members of society deemed dispensable. Thomas’ treatise is not concerned with a specifically gendered analysis but her articulation of the affective domain of citizenship and how doubt (Thomas, 2019, pp. 22-65), expectancy (pp. 88-131) and paranoia (pp. 151-206) operate in a plantation society is important to

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1. Although the plantation system was formally abolished in 1834, Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean bear many vestiges of plantation organizing. The plantation is used in active voice to signal its continual interference in the lives of women.

2. Praxis as I use it here is influenced by Gramsci’s ‘philosophy of praxis as articulated in prison notebooks (circa 1926-1935). Gramsci makes the point that praxis is the gap between refuting a faulty philosophy and creating a different way of doing things and culture. This essay is focussed on how women physically organized versus writing about their lives as theory.

3. I have practiced as an advocate for women and girls affected by gender-based violence in Barbados since 2001.
women's social justice work. The unequal power relations of plantation and the treatment of black female bodies as fetish and reproduction site of 'slaves' resulted in black women having very low defense against sexual and physical violence. High levels of sexual violence prevail in modern Commonwealth Caribbean society coupled with rigid traditional gender norms and expectations supported by Christian religion.

Like subjugated groups across all societies, women in the Commonwealth Caribbean organized to alleviate their circumstances. They were pivotal actors in the pre nationalist and nationalist movements as members of trade unions and political parties. Rhoda Reddock shows an example of the synergy between women's organizing and Trade unionism using Audrey Jeffers of Trinidad and Tobago (1994, p. 165). Milroy Reece of Barbados is an example of how some women used their various connections within the status quo in the period under review. Reece used her association with the Barbados Labour Party to advance women's organizing in Barbados. Reece held the position of general secretary in the party and was a senator in the Parliament of Barbados. That positioning would have given her access to the parliamentary grouping and both their formal and informal meetings. She used these associations to centre the concerns and needs of women in Barbados. Along with the work that Reece was doing inside the political framework, other women were organizing themselves into community self help groups. Patricia Ellis (2003, pp. 70, 71) and Reddock (1994, pp. 162, 164) connect women's organizing to self help initiatives and political organizing post 1930s. The self help and benevolent societies were seen as an outgrowth of the care work that women were expected to carry out in the home. Women's organizing was sometimes an offshoot to and in tandem with general organizing to better the lives of black people and other oppressed groups. In other iterations, attention was placed specifically to the plight of women and their offspring. A good example of the activism of women and the ways that they assisted movements was in the contribution of the two wives of Marcus Garvey, Amy Ashwood and Amy Jacques4. Many women worked alongside their husbands in the various associations and groups which sprang up in the self-determination/nationalist period. Along with the wives there were also privileged women, such as Milroy Reece of Barbados, who became positioned in the [political] party machineries and used the space to mobilize and create spaces for the women's agenda in political parties. The efforts of women at the community levels started to coalesce into various national frameworks. For instance, in Barbados in 1972, women formed an umbrella body for advocacy on women's issues. National Organization of Women was affiliated to the larger international group. In the early years that affiliation did carry some monetary benefits and opportunities to travel for capacity building (Welch, 2022). The affiliation with international groups deepened during the International Decade of the Woman which started in 1975. The spaces and causes that woman organized in and around expanded in line with some of the issues garnering international attention. In her chapter on Caribbean Feminism, in *International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge* University of the West Indies feminist scholar Mohammed writes, "in the second phase [of feminist influence] there was an intensification of "gender" consciousness, even though this was expressed differently by different ethnic groups or classes of women. An increased flow of ideas from North American and European feminism began to influence programs for equality advocated in the region" (p. 726). Along with the local infrastructure with international affiliations, there were also a series of regional groups that coalesced from individual efforts in the territories including The Women's and Development Unit, an arm of the Open Campus of the University of the West Indies, The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) and The Caribbean Women's Association (CARIWA). There were several conferences and meetings between 1975 and 1985 and like other Caribbean countries, Barbados also established a Women's Bureau, which was rebranded into the Bureau of Gender Affairs in 2000. Not withstanding the significant gains in the pre-nationalist and nationalist era, by the time I became the President of NOW in 2020, any official association with the international group had long fallen into disrepair5.

So what exactly happened between the exuberant years of the women's movement in the 1970s and my presidency of NOW in 2020? The abysmal recording keeping in the intervening years erases much of the events, but through intentional interviews and quiet uninterrupted listening to stories that bubble out of elders from time to time, I have picked up the kernels I now share. Despite the gains in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean, there was a kind of dichotomy that emerged in the organizational structure of the women's movement. Organizing at the university level and in nascent non-governmental organizations generally excluded grassroots actors. The same middle-class privilege that created space for women to organize became a hindrance to the emergence of a self-governed movement. Whether it was because of lack of resources to pay membership fees, a belief

4. Amy Ashwood was the first wife (1919-1922) of Marcus Garvey was a pan Africanist and a director of his Black Star Line steam ship company. She was also the founder of his widely read *Negro World* paper. Amy Jacques was the second wife (1922-1940) of Marcus Garvey. She was an activist and journalist. She was the editor of a collection of his speeches called, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*.

5. The National Organization of Women of Barbados has always been transient. It has never had an office space of its own. Some of the records had been kept at the Headquarters of the Democratic Labour Party in George Street St. Michael through affiliations with past presidents and that Party. However, boxes of records became termite infested and were destroyed. The National Organization of Women of Barbados only became a legally registered entity in 2019 although it had been in existence for all those years. When I became President, there were no historical minutes or notes handed over and although I understand the complications, the reports I give of NOW in this article are all based on my firsthand experience and knowledge.

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that the organizations did not address mass-based women’s concerns or the reluctance of grassroots women to embrace the label of ‘feminism’ or ‘feminist’, there were early structural problems that created less of a ground impact and more of a top-heavy, elitist and disjointed enterprise. The class inequality remains a feature of the current women’s movement and is an issue to which I return in subsequent sections.

When Caribbean women exert energy to organize themselves and alleviate issues that affect their lives in significant ways, they inescapably begin from their geographical positionality in the global South – they want to talk about development issues and how, to borrow the phrasing of seminal Caribbean historian, Walter Rodney, colonialism has underdeveloped the Caribbean. One of the earliest and most well-known attempts from women of the global south to set an agenda within the global feminist movement came through the work of Gita Sen and the DAWN collective. DAWN is an acronym for Development Alternatives with Women for A New Era, and it was a group formed in 1984 (Sen, 1987, p. 9). The group included women from the Commonwealth Caribbean region. In seeking to set out an agenda for their needs, as women from countries still affected significantly by poverty and exploitative economic practices, they contended that these issues would have to be considered in any effort to empower women. DAWN’s work was also characterised by a commitment to elevating the experiences and knowledges of the widest majority of Caribbean women. In the book, Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives, the collective articulated its purpose:

The experience of many of the DAWN founders with grassroots initiatives at the community level strengthened their resolve to seek to comprehend such actions within a broader perspective: to link, as it were, the micro-level activities to the macro-level perspectives. The group also affirmed that it is the experiences lived by poor women throughout the Third World in their struggles to ensure the basic survival of their families and themselves that provide the clearest lens for an understanding of development processes. And it is their aspirations and struggles for a future free of the multiple oppressions of gender, class, race, and nation that can form the basis for the new visions and strategies that the world now needs. (Sen, 1987, pp. 9,10)

The major objective of the group was to centre the needs of global south women in development conversations which were controlled by global north feminists. Additionally, the collective wanted to reimagine women’s organizing such that there was a closure in the cleavage between macro organizing and community activist action. That approach would have significantly addressed the issue of uneven class structures discussed above. Feminism failed as an overall organizing framework in the Commonwealth Caribbean exactly because it did not have the capacity to tackle the class and race issues. The hegemony of white women had resulted in the agenda for feminist organizing being set outside and beyond global south women (Sen, 1987, pp. 18, 19). Sen and the collective tried to challenge the power relations within feminism itself to create space. Rafia Zakaria (2021, pp. 58-65) shows how the challenge was thwarted using a conceptual concept as the example. One of the conceptual expansions that DAWN advanced to facilitate an agenda based on their lives and experiences was the notion of ‘empowerment’. Empowerment was meant to be a politically disruptive epistemology. The intention of the DAWN collective was to challenge the agenda within feminist organizing. Women of the global south wanted not just their issues centered but also their ways of knowing and organizing validated. The idea of empowerment became a buzzword after it was introduced by DAWN but it was stripped of the anti-colonial and political power that Sen and DAWN intended 6. Western feminism has not proven to be helpful to Caribbean women in broadly addressing the issue of neocolonialism and how unequal power affected women’s life chances in the global south. So, the issue of naming and whether we impose feminism on women’s organizing efforts in Barbados and the Caribbean is not a simplistic one - it is actually a point of departure that will condition future outcomes and approaches.

**Feminism and the Caribbean**

I suggest that we use the term feminism to describe women’s organizing in the Commonwealth Caribbean only because it is the lexeme given to us by the western world for resistance to patriarchal hegemony but not because it aligns with any other philosophical or guiding principle. This is not atypical of the overall linguistic process under colonialism. It mimics the rest of our experience with the process of names and naming - we use an English lexeme (or whichever colonizing language is the official language in the case territories other than Barbados) but the meanings associated with the lexeme are completely different in many cases than the strict definition in the colonial lexicon. Naming is powerful. As subjugated people we have been conditioned to believe that naming is western activity. I often feel conflicted as I engage the work of scholars like Patricia Collins who make

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cogent and well reasoned arguments that mainly explain the distinctions and differences in black women’s processes and theories of organizing but retain feminism as a name for a related but also significantly different product. At the same time, I understand the linguistic experience of subjugated people. We know that the global north has the power to make a name legitimate and that even if we go through the process of deriving an alternate name for how we organize as black women will still have to depend on the western intellectual hegemony to validate that name. I also understand the view of sisters who believe that there is value in forcing an expansion of feminism to serve all types of women as an act of resistance and claiming space.

Feminism has provided the academic and theoretical tools for women operating in the academic spaces in the Caribbean to be able to talk about and explain women’s lives and experiences with misogyny and patriarchal hegemony. Notwithstanding, I do not believe that it has offered the tools that activists need to convert theory to the kind of actions needed to adjust the unequal power relations that affect the lives of Caribbean women. The difference between academic feminism and activism parallels the distinction that Collins makes in her discussion of who is considered as an intellectual in U.S Black feminism. Collins writes, “One is neither born an intellectual nor does one become one by earning a degree. Rather, doing intellectual work of the sort envisioned within Black feminism requires a process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs.” (p. 18) This separation between women who operate in academic spaces and ‘ordinary’ woman is also an unreconciled one in the Caribbean. Women employed in academic spaces are the ones who identify more with feminism but with no connection to the work and activism and the ‘ordinary’ women trying to find solutions to their problem but not wanting to claim feminism as the organizing label for their work. The discomfort with the label ‘feminist’ is an important one which has not received enough attention in the history of Caribbean women’s organizing. There is a noticeable difference in treatment of this issue based on the positioning of the commentator although even the academic commentators concede the tension. Patricia Mohammed writes,

> Despite the ideological influences, the term feminism was not widely used in the Caribbean to describe women’s responses and challenging actions, nor does it present positive connotations among Caribbean women themselves. The majority of women in the region seem to equate feminism with strident anti-male hostility, lesbianism and separatism. Despite the continued openness of these societies to international influences through ongoing migration, women’s struggles in the twentieth century have remained ideologically rooted in the reality of Caribbean life. (Mohammed, 2000, p. 726)

Rather than assimilating, to established practices of feminism, the tension remains evident in reflections from Caribbean women who migrate to global north spaces from the Caribbean or occupy those spaces as women with Caribbean heritage. Yvonne Bobb-Smith in outlining four major differences between Caribbean feminism and Canadian feminism highlights the differences in race and class privilege of white Canadian feminist (Bobb-Smith, 2004, pp. 167-168). Related to this point, Bobb-Smith highlights the unwillingness of Canadian women to acknowledge racism and refute it as a practice (p. 168). She notes that the second major difference was the perception of the Caribbean territories that women had migrated from. Canadian women saw the Caribbean as a site of ‘oppression’ while Caribbean women fought to retain connections because those territories were still home and retained important family connections (ibid.). Bobb-Smith explained that the third major issue that separated Caribbean feminist philosophy from Canadian philosophy was the exertion of hegemony over the identities of Caribbean women. Canadian feminism subjugated Caribbean women as black women as opposed to leaving space for the various identities Caribbean women claimed. The tension about feminism and its usefulness as an organizing principle for Caribbean women is important to reconcile for the future but it is also an important historical correction to make as well. Caribbean activists highlight both the historical inaccuracy of the assignment of the label and the detriment of the label. Patricia Ellis makes it clear that there was women’s organizing long before feminist organizing in the region:

> The work of these two types of organizations [political and social welfare groups] in the early years of the last century [20th century] laid the foundation and set the stage for the emergence of a vibrant women’s movement in the latter half of the century. They linked the social welfare groups of the 1940s and 1950s to the Women and Development groups of the 1970s and early 1980s and to the activist, feminist groups of the late 1980s and 1990s. (2003, p. 71)

Women in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean have organized for gender social justice before and after feminism in ways that were unrelated to feminism. Feminism as a label for the efforts of women in Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean brings with it too much baggage and, in my view, is a relic not worth the division it causes. While feminism had some resonance with Commonwealth Caribbean women it could not provide a philosophical mooring because the framework of feminism cannot be a centrifugal force in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Feminism cannot adequately deal with racism, classism and poverty. The absence of such concerns in feminist theory resulted in Commonwealth Caribbean and other types of women being on the periphery. The women of the Commonwealth Caribbean heavily depended on praxis and organized based on finding
tangible strategies to ameliorate the plight of women in the period under review. The conceptual framework that premiums praxis as an important departure for the Commonwealth Caribbean self-determination/nationalist project(s) is not unique to women’s organizing alone. It is a feature of the way that the ‘new’ societies were developed in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Put another way, women’s organizing was related to and a part of a broader anti-oppressive/anti-colonial/decolonial Commonwealth Caribbean intellectual movement.

Ellis in her summation of the place of feminism highlights the divisions caused by the unresolved issue:

> Western academy demands disciplinary titles that delineate methods and possibilities in line with the established (and unchangeable) status quo. Although we, as global south intellectuals know that these frames are restrictive, convict us and are unsuitable in substantial ways we use them because of the intellectual permission they afford. In the case of feminism as a frame, I am not convinced that feminist ways of organizing, and thinking were the pervading ones of my foremothers in their gender social justice praxis. I believe that while some of their ideas flowed seamlessly into this ‘ism’, there were also differences, contentions and ways that other titles such as womanism may have been more apt or fitting from an epistemological perspective. Although the contention has been highlighted continuously, (Andaiye, 2020a, pp. 10, 11), (Mohammed, 2003, p. 18), (Ellis, 2003, p. 90), (Ford-Smith, 1989, p. 21) academic writers have been steadfast to the ‘ism’ because it was a career making label during the United Nations Decade of Women and for subsequent years after. There is a way in which the heavy investment in thrusting feminism onto Caribbean women was a middle-class betrayal of the women’s movement as a mass movement in much the same way that the (male) middle class usurped political nationalism. Feminism was an ill fitted western construct along with many others that set rigidly in place the oppression of Caribbean women. I have no loyalty to feminism – my goal is to bolster the movement in the streets of Barbados to the benefit of women and girls in Barbados. We need tools and a philosophy of organizing.

> My analysis of the inability of feminism to offer tools and philosophical mooring for women’s activism in the Caribbean is not a glib dismissal of western theory. Marxism is a theoretical framework that offered space for Black people to theorize about their experiences. Marxism is a western, male construct. Feminism, conversely is a western female construct but I saw differences between the two and limitations that hindered feminism serving black women in the way that Marxism served Black Caribbean people in reimagining society beyond the plantation. Feminism refused to see its racism and, in some cases, used it as a part of strategy. White women fighting for suffrage compared themselves to Black men who were othered due to race. They resisted othering for its usefulness in their struggle while at once being completely silent on the question of black women who were twice othered – by race and gender (Zakaria, 2021, pp. 28, 29). The proponents of Marxism during the early nationalist period were often ejected from their class privilege by association to the left. Their challenge of hegemonic structures was more complete whereas feminists retained privilege in their whiteness and often in their class positions and sought space within hegemony rather than an outright assault on it. Western feminism only challenged patriarchy as far as it needed to with the aim to secure a place in the system with some rights and privilege. Marxism was not arguing for a place in the capitalist model of production. They were proposing an alternative. One of the ways that Black struggle expanded Marxism was by creating attention to the experience of Black people as a collective. White feminism excluded Black and brown women and refused to allow space – the separatism that Caribbean women read was real and not imagined. Feminism in the Commonwealth Caribbean was never comfortable with the masses and the masses were never comfortable with feminism. It was the purview of a few intellectual elite. Marxism, on the other hand was taken on the ground by actors such as Walter Rodney and given to the masses as a tool and language to enable their organizing and advocacy. Feminism was a theoretical space whereas Marxism moved beyond that to be also a praxis. Since feminism has proven not to be a bedrock for action in women’s organizing in the Commonwealth Caribbean, what can we use? How can we bridge the gaps in the efforts of our foremothers and create a stronger women’s movement?

**Conscience as Philosophy**

Andaiye’s work encapsulates important lessons. Andaiye was a Guyanese born middle class woman, whose family was connected to the first black Prime Minister, Forbes Burnham. She was educated at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus and is
recognized for her contribution both to the political struggle for anti-colonial and racial freedom and the advancement of women in Guyana and the Caribbean. In describing Andaiye’s contribution to Guyana and the World, Clem Seecharan’ writes, “hers has been one of the most compelling contributions by a Guyanese in sustaining a culture of protest and change – animated by a radical imagination….She is not just an inspirational and transformative figure in Guyana, but a regional and international champion of working class women’s rights.” (Seecharan, 2020, p. xiii) Eusi Kwayana used a single word to describe what Guyana had lost when Andaiye made passage to the spirit world in 2019. Eusi said, “speaking generally and politically and socially what we have lost is Guyana’s conscience.” (Kwayana, 2019). This idea of conscience is not a western concept bound up in Christian dogma. The substance of Andaiye as conscience is undergirded by Paget Henry’s assertion that Caribbean philosophy is concerned with “cultural freedom, political freedom and racial equality.” (2000, p. 47) Andaiye understood intersecting layers of oppression including race, class and gender and she always rejected those oppressions and their various machinations. Paget Henry clearly articulates in Caliban’s Reason that Caribbean philosophy is “embedded in other Caribbean discourses such as ideological, literary, and religious production.” (Henry, 2000, p. xii) Henry notes that although philosophy is usually seen as a historical, the very development of the Commonwealth Caribbean means that its historical development is a critical factor in understanding it philosophically (Henry, 2000, p. 1). Henry explains that, “it [philosophy] is often implicitly referenced or engaged in the production of answers to everyday questions and problems that are being framed in non-philosophical discourses.” (Henry, 2000, p. 2) Andaiye added to the philosophical understanding of oppression in the Caribbean using gender as a framework but also approached her work as inextricably linked to race and class oppression. Women’s organizing is different in Guyana than in Barbados because Andaiye dealt with the unequal class relations among women. Commonwealth Caribbean territories can be placed on a spectrum with Guyana being a best-case scenario of women’s organizing and Barbados as the most problematic.

Of Andaiye’s connection to (Caribbean) philosophy, Robin D. G Kelly writes, “Struggle produces new philosophy, not the other way around. Action produces our reality which then demands new analysis, which in turn possesses material force. Andaiye embodies and exemplifies this idea in every way.” (Andaiye, 2020b, Kelly, 2020, p. xxiii) Itemized features of Andaiye’s conscience include unbending commitment to principle regardless of the personal risk or loss of privilege, a belief in Blackness and resistance to colonialism and unequal power relations in any form, sisterhood and “neighbourliness” (pp. 65-68) as important features of women’s organizing because they address the class, racial and ethnic divisions created in Caribbean societies though slavery and indentureship. Working in the multi-ethnic space of Guyana made Andaiye invest in creating spaces where all Guyanese women could participate in their liberation. This meant women getting to know each other and building space for difficult conversations. As explained above, women’s relations one to another is an unaddressed issue in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Barbados and much of the Commonwealth Caribbean is too small to build critical mass in women’s organizing without healing the cleavage.

The work of Andaiye in Guyana provides leadership and organizational frameworks that Barbadian (and other) woman can transplant with minimal effort. Andaiye was not only concerned with the unequal power relations between men and women but also those between women. She contends,

I do not believe that we thought any further (I certainly did not) than the need for the autonomy of women from men. But in organizing, if we cut gender off from the other power hierarchies – that is, if we work to end the power relations between men and women while ignoring the power relations among women, we will not succeed in transforming the power relations between women and men because we are not aiming at the whole power structure of which the power relations between men and women are only a part.” (p. 10)

For true sisterhood to exist among Caribbean women their relationships one to the other must be stripped and rebuilt. Feminist organizing cannot offer a model for Caribbean women because it is yet to address the unequal power relations that have characterized its own existence. The unequal power relations intersect with race and class but also educational and other middle-class privilege.

Andaiye’s idea of freeing women was rooted in the overall idea of freeing black people from oppression. This perhaps fed into another feature of Andaiye’s organizing – what I refer to as ‘disciplinary unruliness’. Although Andaiye did claim the term ‘feminism’ and associated it with her work (more as a practice of hindsight (Andaiye, 2020a, p. 11)), she never boxed herself into a subtype. This ‘disciplinary unruliness’ allowed Caribbean women to not only gather the pieces of feminist thought that they could adapt and apply but also to move beyond feminism to invoke the knowledges of Caribbean thinkers such as Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon and C. L. R. James when that was useful. Andaiye also opted not to engage the organizing principles of feminism in ways that would be divisive to the Caribbean generally. For example, her thoughts about sexuality expanded over her years of activism.

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7. Seecharan is Professor Emeritus of History at London Metropolitan University.
8. I expand this point in the second conceptual essay that I am writing.
but she did not let this eclipse the way that racial inequality affected Caribbean men (p. xxxv). As opposed to choosing a single approach, Andaiye worked on all forms of oppression and became known for that as a feature of her organizing.

As practicing Caribbean activists search for an organizational frame for the future, there is much to be gained from reflecting on the work and ancestor’s experiences. Collins argues that an important element in unlocking the full scope of black feminist thought is broadening the idea of who is an intellectual (p. 18). I agree with that expansion because it significantly helps with the cleavage we have in the Commonwealth Caribbean between academic feminists and activists. Expanding space allows activists to be elevated as ‘knowledge producers’ who have organized around women’s and girls’ issues and have valuable lived experience. Engaging the years of work of our ancestors, connects and grounds us all the way back to African ways of interpreting and knowing. Conscience as an Afro-Caribbean philosophical marker is, like the rest of Afro-Caribbean philosophical forms, highly political. This is because of the defensive position that must be adopted to refute western claims of Black inferiority and depravity. In reviewing the past, we fight the tendency to see the global south as the result of our interaction with western entities and we create space to respect the products that we have (re)built for ourselves. Caribbean women favour a dialectical approach to both interrogating and representing their lived realities. Some of the intersectional points include race, gender, history and political hegemony. This puts Caribbean ways of women’s organizing at odds with more positivist approaches to constructing knowledge. Caribbean women view their identities as fluid, and they want the fullest range of possibilities for organizing. In some instances, women organize as a part of anti-colonial efforts with men. In other instances, women organize with other women of the global south such as the early collaborations that resulted in the formation of DAWN. Sometimes Commonwealth Caribbean women want to organize for and on behalf of their men folk – brothers, sons and lovers who are themselves marginalized by racial stereotypes and persistent poverty and underdevelopment. Way before intersectionality was a popular theoretical tool available to feminist discourse, Andaiye and Caribbean women were using this approach to their lives at the level of the person and the personal.

**The Way Forward: Thinking About the Future After So Many Have Thought About the Future**

Collins notes that a major activity in black feminist thought is to recover the ideas lost to us from foremothers whose works was not canonized (Collins, 2009, p. 16). This paper sought to mine Andaiye’s approach to women’s organizing for its useful philosophical insights into what has worked in the streets of the Caribbean to enable women to use their own voices for upliftment. Here I sought to look at women’s organizing as praxis and not a theoretical construct. In the second paper I focus less on philosophy and more on tools. I however offer cursory approach on the latter here as a part of finalizing the current discourse. Filling gaps in the literature about women’s organizing in (especially) Barbados and the Commonwealth Caribbean is important. Documenting both the positive lessons and areas of failure in the movement creates space for strategy discussions and eventually will lead to rejuvenation, new research agendas and synthesis of issues and strategies useful for the majority of women. Currently, the agenda is controlled by middle class women acting as consultants, service providers or academics. Women’s organizing suffers because a part of these women maintaining their middle-class privilege is loyalty to the status quo. While this helped in the early years as with Milroy Reece discussed above, it results in injustices against women and girls being overlooked. Breaking rank with the status quo will be an important prerequisite for operating using conscience as praxis. The status quo is generally hostile to changes that diminish its power. For this reason, women inside the Commonwealth Caribbean will need the support of allies in the Diaspora. The Diaspora has long been a haven for dissenters to the Commonwealth Caribbean status quo. Diasporic connections were critically useful to Andaiye. It provided her with work and refuge when she was fired from her job as a school principal (2000, p. 53) and it also provided better health care options through networks for her to battle her cancer (2020, pp. 169-170). Along with the physical escape they offer, Diasporas can help to provide funding for advocacy. Addressing the relationships between women is residual work. All these tolls I address further in the forthcoming paper, but I conclude the current argument here.

Collins does not believe that concentrating on naming is an important part of U. S Black women’s production of a space to think about and organize in their own interest. She writes, “rather than developing definitions and arguing over naming practices – for example, whether this thought should be called Black feminism, womanism, Afrocentric feminism, Africana womanism and the like – a more useful approach lies in revisiting the reasons why Black feminist thought exists at all.” (Collins, 2009, p. 25) Black feminist thought exists as a dialectical departure from white feminist thought. It exists because the epistemology underpinning white feminist thought does not offer enough possibility for Black women to derive solutions to their experiences of oppression. White feminism does not treat to sisterhood questions which are significant ones in the Commonwealth Caribbean as a relic of the social structure of plantation society. White feminism does not challenge the way that black women were dehumanized for the benefit of both white women and patriarchy. White feminism also does not deal with conscience because white feminists have not been willing to step outside of established structures such as liberalism and neoliberalism and class hegemony to stand on principles in terms of broad social justice. While I accept Collin’s argument that substance is always more important than naming,
naming is a powerful and political process. As a Black woman who comes from an Island where children were beaten for perceived ineptitude to master a colonial language, discarding colonial language is in and of itself, defiant. As a Black woman who has tried to create the action of resistance in a small post-colonial society for twenty years, I realize that naming is a critical epistemological endeavour. I think the difference between my views on naming and Collins’ may be caused by approaches and positionality rather than the simplicity of one of us being right and the other wrong. Collins approaches Black feminist thought from a perspective of finding voice. (p. vii) There are ways that voice can be found using language and epistemologies that are coopted. My approach to thinking about feminism and its usefulness is not about finding voice, it is about finding philosophy. As Kelly put it, my purpose is to find the material force that can be used to organize and sustain women’s activism in the Caribbean. Further, Collins is writing from a global north positioning, albeit as a member of a marginalized minority. Although there are structural ways that U.S Black women are constrained by their positioning it is not quite the same experience as women of the global south.

In order to find funding for women’s organizing in the global south, activists are automatically thrust into unequal power relations with donors. Dependence on international donor funding to support women’s organizing in the region is a restriction that plagued Barbados and other areas in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Andaiye (2000, p. 84) lamented the fact that models of donor funding depended on exploitation of poor women while foreign consultants were well remunerated for the same work. There have been significant woman hours lost by Caribbean women in filling out tedious grant applications and reporting requirements for international agencies. This ‘busy work’ neither assisted their efforts to ameliorate inequality in the Caribbean nor has been monetized by donors. Donors measure the ability to fill in these requirements more than the effect and contributions to lives on the ground that have been impacted by programming and capacity building. Ford-Smith (1989, pp. 58-63) has also highlighted how the unequal power relations have rendered Caribbean activists powerless to advocate for project elements that suited them and not international donors. Patricia Ellis outlines several activities that were supported by donor aid during the 1970s including public education programmes and rallies, conferences, seminars and workshops (2003, pp. 83-84). However, Ellis also notes that this flow of international donor aid absolved the governments of the Commonwealth Caribbean from embedding gender and providing funds for the work in their territories. Donor aid undermined the Commonwealth Caribbean women’s movement in two major ways – first it upheld an unequal (colonial) relation with Commonwealth Caribbean women as beggars and incapable of autonomous decisions and second - in creating funding models that kept the movement tied to project work outside of and unmatched by government support and financial commitment. Unfortunately, the advent of the academic centres for gender in the University of the West Indies’ institutionalized the exploitation rather than ushering in a shift. By 1993, when the centres were open the Caribbean was flirting with globalization and an outward focus, as compared to a nationalist and community minded focus in the 1970s when WAND opened. WAND remained open and more connected to community activism, while the gender institutes took a completely different direction. An elite few women were well paid as UWI consultants while other activist and community-based activists continued their work as volunteers. Again, feminism falls short of solutions for the unequal power relations in funding between women of the global south and north because feminists from the global north are embedded in the structure and benefitting from it.

Linguistic processes have always been a site of contention and resistance for black people. Africans, even when they were forced to use colonized language, overlaid a set of words on a substratum of African culture and ways of knowing. The process of naming is never simplistic or devoid of history and Andaiye herself picks this up at the personal level when she shed her birthname to rename herself in a way she thought fitting and reverent of her African heritage. As Trotz notes, Andaiye was conscious of the power of language as “...a product and producer of action.” (Trotz, 2020, p. xxxiv) How do we produce sisterhood and neighbourliness when feminism does not value that as a core belief? How will black women of the global south find validation and support for their agenda of needs when white and global north feminists keep employing exploitative frames for donor funding for development work? We have been able in some instances to add an adjective to an established ‘ism’ or disciplinary category in some cases (Black Marxism, Caribbean linguistics) and create an epistemological space that is beneficial to the creation of Black resistance and action. However, despite laudable efforts, I believe that in the case of the Caribbean, feminism has not been able to stretch enough to create a mooring for Caribbean women’s organizing. I think Caribbean women’s organizing is stuck in a kind of philosophical conundrum - not for feminists in the Caribbean but for activists - the field workers of the movement. Feminism cannot give us the tools we need to make a movement. Honest reviewers will admit that for all the money, time and international treaties signed in the Caribbean, the power relations and structures of oppression that affect the lives of Caribbean women have not changed significantly enough. A critical feature of Andaiye’s organizing had been the way that her actions have always been about the betterment of the women in whose names she organized. There was never any disconnect between her and the women she kept shoulder with. They provided her with tactic, support and motivation to engage the work she did. Conscience is an organizing principle with a constituency and that constituency was not foreign or disposable. I believe that at this juncture of our organizing a return to conscience offers us a powerful space first to create an

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9. When I make this point I am not referring to the Women and Development Unit opened in 1978 and run out of the then Extra Mural campus of the University of the West Indies. At that time that space was used to facilitate and enable community focus but that model changed significantly with the opening of the Institutes of Gender and Development Studies embedded in the three physical Campuses of UWI.
agenda for the next phase of our work and then organizing principles. In celebrating the reach of Andaiye, there is also sense in preserving and expanding her contribution.

**References**


