

90 | wal-mart, 'katrina', and other ideological tricks: Jamaican hotel workers in Michigan

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abstract

This essay explores the relationships between labour and community formation in order to think through how, where, and when diasporic solidarities are imagined or refused. I draw on ethnographic research among Jamaican women contracted for seasonal work in US hotels to situate diasporic calls and responses in relation to specific contexts and a changing global political economy. I show how global geopolitical shifts not only shape the processes of identity formation and social reproduction, but also condition the perpetuation of notions of nationalized racial hierarchies and ideologies of progress. I also show that hotel workers' notions of 'America' and their commitment to the 'American Dream' shapes their subjectivities as migrant workers/consumers and, in their assessment, differentiates them from African-Americans, particularly those most immediately affected by Hurricane Katrina. In doing so, I demonstrate that one of the ideological hegemonies of diaspora is the idea that an individual's capacity to affect their own social mobility and that of their social network always outstrips the 'locals' in diasporic elsewhere.

keywords

migration; labour; gender; diaspora; Jamaica; hurricane Katrina

After returning home to Jamaica on 8 September 2005, Hermine Clarke-Lewis, one of the more than 300 hotel workers who had been stationed in the area ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, recalled her experience to a reporter for one of the daily newspapers: 'I have never seen a storm like that before...The place was very stink', she said. 'We did not have any light or any water...I wanted to come home the same day but I am glad I am alive' (Rose, 2005). Another worker, Joy Gordon Coley, stated: 'I experienced "Gilbert" and "Ivan" but they cannot compare to "Katrina"' (Hepburn, 2005). And Keisha Osmond remembered: 'When I saw the dead bodies downtown Biloxi, Mississippi I cried...there [was] not one house standing down there' (Hines, 2005a). For most of us in the United States, the images of New Orleans and Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina provoked both sorrow and rage – sorrow at the devastation of so many, and rage at the fact that the devastation could have been prevented, that federal help was so long in coming, and that both of these factors seemed to hinge on the axis of racism, or, as rapper Kanye West put it, the sense that 'George Bush doesn't care about black people'. In Jamaica, commentators were also preoccupied with these issues. But for them, there was an additional concern, and that was the fate of the Jamaican workers who had been contracted through the Ministry of Labour to work at places like Beau Rivage and the Grand Casino, places that were levelled by Katrina.

These workers were part of the US Hospitality Programme, an overseas employment programme developed by the Jamaican Ministry of Labour that sponsors the seasonal migration of Jamaicans to work in hotels throughout the United States. I have been following individual hotel workers since 2000, and am now in the middle of a more extensive ethnographic study of the programme in the Mackinaw Straits area of Northern Michigan. I have based myself there because, of the total workers who participated in the programme in 2004, over a quarter of them – about 80 per cent of whom are women – ended up in Michigan (1,164). This number far surpasses the number of workers sent to any other state. Florida, which hosted 645 workers and South Carolina, which hosted 578, come the closest, but workers in these states were employed primarily in large resorts, rather than in the smaller, family-owned businesses that are prevalent in Michigan. These businesses, like the workers they hire, are seasonal, open only from April to October, when they close for the long, cold winter. In fact, many of the business owners are also seasonal residents – though they may be from the area, or from somewhere else in Michigan, they rarely stay through the winter. This means that while on any given day during the summer season the two main towns in the area might receive between 10–13,000 visitors, the combined year round population is only about 1,400. Like Jamaica, tourism is clearly the mainstay of the local economy and has been since the mid-twentieth century.¹

¹ In 1957, a bridge was built between the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan, which

Throughout my fieldwork, I have been curious about how Jamaican women's participation in this programme changes their ideas about themselves and their

future possibilities, and alters their roles within their families and neighbourhoods. As well, I have been interested in how their concentrated presence in US tourist areas transforms these communities, both in terms of labour dynamics and socio-cultural interactions. By spending concentrated periods of time during several summers in Michigan, and by following particular workers back home to Jamaica, I have been able to gain some insights into the effects of movement and mobility on subject formation, family and community life, and national development. In doing so, I seek to build on recent work that has attempted to understand how reconfigurations of capitalism have allowed some women to enter global markets in new and sometimes lucrative ways as migrant domestic workers, sex workers, pink-collar service and tourism workers, and suitcase traders. This body of research emphasizes how women's contemporary economic inventiveness generates new subjectivities through consumption. As a result, the focus has been on women workers as particular kinds of brokers within their family and community networks.

I have been particularly interested in how Jamaican women's consumption during and after their temporary sojourns in the United States might both support and challenge what they have already come to understand about 'America' and the 'American Dream' from media and family members living abroad. In other words, I have been preoccupied with the question of whether their temporary status engenders a particular spatial relationship not only to the rhythms of work and leisure, but also to the complicated intersections among locations of consumption, formulations of (transnational? diasporic?) community, and conceptualizations of progress and social mobility. In part, therefore, this essay is designed to explore the links among consumption, status, identity, and community by interrogating what hotel workers' consumerist desires and practices mean, and how their consumerism might also reproduce those aspects of Caribbean subjectivity that have to do with the region's long history of migration and transnationalism.

Because I am also interested in the extent to which seasonal mobility might offer different kinds of opportunities for women to elaborate alternative formulations of racial, classed, and gendered community that are less tethered to the particular power dynamics of one or another nation-state, this essay is also designed to relate a discussion of the tensions surrounding the forging of diasporic common ground to a conversation about the power of the 'American dream' ideology in migrant subject formation. In other words, I am interested in bringing together two notions of diasporic community that are usually considered separately – that of diaspora as a worldwide black community and that of diaspora as a community that results from transnational migration (cyclical or permanent), itself propelled by the various structural exigencies of the current global moment. I want to bring these two notions together in order to demonstrate that diasporic relations, though supposedly organized through a

brought an end to the freight shipping business that had been dominant in the area since the early twentieth century when the technology was developed for ice-breaking barges. Now, tourism accounts for 80–90 per cent of the tax bases of the two villages where the majority of Jamaicans are placed.

sense of *racial* community, are mediated not only by nationality but critically also by class and gender. Moreover, these are mediations that must be understood within the context of a changing global capitalism in which labour, capital, and commodities are connected in dynamic ways.

More specifically, I am interested in bringing these two registers of diaspora together in order to demonstrate how Jamaican hotel workers' subjectivities as particular kinds of migrant workers/consumers reproduce a liberal notion of the 'American Dream' that limits their ability to imagine potential solidarities between themselves and African-Americans. Ultimately, this will bring me to the argument that one of the ideological hegemonies of diaspora in the contemporary period is the idea that one's capacity to affect one's own social mobility always outstrips the 'locals' in diasporic elsewhere. In this case, this means that in their analyses of poverty and possibility across diasporic locations, Jamaican hotel workers foregrounded the aspects of the social terrain that buoyed their own agential power, downplayed other aspects that would have complicated assessments that their own hard work was the most important explanation for their success, and ignored the assessments of many employers and residents who did not see them – whether because of their race or their status as temporary workers – as legitimate claimants to the 'American Dream'.

urbanity and shopping, or, why spend your money at wal-mart when you could save to buy a house in Jamaica?

While government-assisted contract labour migration schemes have long existed as integral parts of Caribbean development initiatives, the US Hospitality Programme is representative of a more general global shift whereby service industries have proliferated and, as a result, migrant female labour has become increasingly desirable. Indeed, though the US Hospitality Programme is one of four Overseas Employment Programmes (the other three are the US Farm Work Programme, the Canadian Farm and Factory Work Programme, and the Canadian Construction Work Programme), it is the only one in which women comprise the majority of participants.² Initiated over three decades ago, the programme did not reach today's high levels of participation until the late 1990s and early 2000s. Where 46 US employers had tapped into the programme in 1998, by the year 2004 that number had increased to over 140. And between 1994 and 2002, a period when the Farm Work Programme was being scaled back,³ the number of Jamaicans working in these hotels grew from 250 to just over 4,000, with the most exponential increases in participation occurring in 1998 and 1999 (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 1999, 2002). In 2004, 4,334 workers participated in the Hotel Work Programme, despite the H2B visa cap implemented

² In 1999, for example, women comprised 70 per cent of hotel workers. This is in contrast to the Farm or Factory Work Programmes, in which males accounted for 85.3 per cent of those employed overseas (Ministry of Labour

early that year by the United States government (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2005).

In the Mackinaw Straits area, recruiting Jamaican workers has been seen as necessary because over the past fifteen years or so, the tourism season in the area has both lengthened and broadened. On the one hand, the season has picked up a couple months on each end of the summer, and on the other several newer hotels have been built. Both of these factors have created a need for additional workers at the same time that traditional sources of labour have grown scarcer. Previously, many employers relied upon two primarily American streams of workers: college students; and those circuits of itinerant workers who followed the tourist seasons of resorts throughout the United States, travelling to Michigan for the summer months and to the south for the winter. However, college students can only work June to August, and once air conditioning became more readily available, southern resorts began to stay open year-round, providing steady work for those who wanted to settle in one place. These shifts led employers to look to other potential labour pools, and because the largest resort in the area had been successfully bringing Jamaican workers through the Ministry's Programme for several decades prior to the most recent tourism boom, other employers began to follow in its footsteps. For the Jamaican workers, however, the Mackinaw Straits area is quite a shock, not at all what they expected when they learned they were going to America to work.

There is a phrase Jamaicans use to talk about life outside the city and that's 'back a yard'. 'Yard', here, references home, one's own specific 'yard' but also more generally Jamaica, the 'rock'. This is contrasted with life beyond the 'rock' in 'foreign', which connotes anywhere overseas, but most particularly these days, the United States. When a place is described as 'back a yard', it is country, bush, and usually backward. Several of the hotel workers with whom I have spent time describe northern Michigan as 'back a foreign'. In fact, when discussing the option of extending their visas at the end of the summer season in order to stay in the US and work through the winter, a few women said they would like to try to go somewhere else. 'We want to go to America', they said, and when I mentioned they were in it, they laughed. Apparently, northern Michigan did not meet their expectations of what 'America' would be like based on what they already knew from friends and family members who had travelled or lived abroad, from the US media that is cabled into their homes in Jamaica, and from the popular musical circulations between hip hop and dancehall artists that they hear on the radio and at dances.

In other words, even those who were in the United States for the very first time already had a mediated experience of 'America'; they did not need to be in 'America' to know it. This is what Inderpal Grewal (2005) is getting at in her discussion of subject formation among Indian migrants in the United States during the 1990s. For many around the world, she writes: 'the "American dream"

and Social Security, 1999).

3 The turn of the century de-emphasis on the farm work programme, under which Jamaican male labourers have been recruited from predominantly rural areas to reap orchard crops and other agricultural produce in the United States and Canada, has been due to the growing use of machines in the reaping process, as well as the growing problem of illegal entry into these countries by persons 'running off' (Daily Observer, 2001).

was a search for a future in which the desire for consumption, for liberal citizenship, and for work came together to produce a specific subject of migration' (2005:5). This is a subject with expectations that are based on already-existing knowledges that have circulated among communities through a variety of media. For hotel workers in Michigan, included in these expectations was urbanity. Patsy, a worker from Kingston, told me: 'This is not the kind of thing you see on TV. Usually you think of America and think of big cities or New York, or that kind of thing... It's not what I expected, the stores are not so good in this area. You have to go all the way to Traverse City to get a really good mall'. Josie from St. Catherine agreed. 'Well, this is not Detroit or Chicago, Miami, or New York', she said. 'When we go to Miami or even Grand Traverse we think, "Oh, this is the real thing". It's more country like here, you can't get the clothes you see on TV'.

As is evident in these women's remarks, urbanity is, in large part, associated with shopping, and good shopping is crucial because they are buying goods for their families that they hope will last the whole year. In fact, one of the main complaints I heard from workers was that 'Michigan is nice, but it's expensive and difficult to get things'. One of the difficulties had to do with the lack of extensive public transportation. In the villages where they worked, there were no shopping centres, so they had to go farther a field. There was one bus that ran to a town 15 miles away, but its last trip was at 4 pm, an hour before they clocked out for the day. This meant that they were either limited to shopping on their days off, that they had to pool their money together to hire a taxi or mini-bus service, or that they were dependent on their employers or people like me to take them to the stores. Moreover, these towns did not have the variety of stores they would like. Patsy lamented, 'I tell my son I can't bring him any fancy shirts because all they have here is Wal-Mart and K-Mart'. If they wanted broader fashion options, therefore, they had to go to a town 40 miles away where there was a J.C. Penney's.

Being able to buy things, whether in the US or in Jamaica, was in fact one of the main reasons hotel workers gave for having signed up for the programme in the first place. While most of the women I have spoken with had employment histories in Jamaica that included hospitality or service work, many of them experienced interruptions within their employment trajectories, or found that despite consistently working in Jamaica they were unable to provide for themselves and their families in the manner that they wished. This led them to seek alternative avenues for employment, and ultimately, to the Hotel Workers Programme. And indeed, remittances from the various overseas employment programmes contribute significantly to the Jamaican economy. By the end of 2004, the 13,569 Jamaicans participating in the Overseas Employment Programmes contributed US\$12 million in remittances (Jamaica Gleaner, 2005b). Of this figure, hotel workers contributed US\$8.334 million (Hines, 2005b), despite the fact that some

600 workers were sent home prematurely due to an active hurricane season in Florida (Jamaica Gleaner, 2005a). Yet the government calculates remittances only based on the 20 per cent of individual workers' pay that is deducted compulsorily from their salaries and repatriated to Jamaican bank accounts that they will be able to access upon their return. This means that the myriad Western Union transactions – as well as the thousands of barrels containing food, clothing, and electronics – that workers send to Jamaica on their own accord, goods that represent one-fifth of total household consumption (Planning Institute, 1999), are not included in this figure.

Indeed, the ability to earn US dollars was usually cited by hotel workers as one of the draws of the programme, since they could then benefit from a fluctuating currency exchange rate in Jamaica. However, because they often spent most of their money in the US, they would not necessarily benefit from the exchange (the portion of their pay that is repatriated to Jamaica comes to them in Jamaican, not US dollars). Nevertheless, they felt that the US stores offered more variety in the kinds of items that were attractive to them, and that the most expensive items (electronics) were cheaper in the United States than they were in Jamaica, as were some food staples (which is why most hotel workers would also stock up on rice, cooking oil, ketchup, and flour for themselves and their families). Sometimes, workers told me, even when items were not substantially cheaper in the US, they would buy them anyway, because 'if you don't buy it here, often your money goes to something else when you're there [in Jamaica], so you don't get it at all'. For some of them, the goods and money last through the year. 'Sometimes it doesn't', Patsy said, 'but it's still worth it and it's much better than not working. This way I can buy a few things each year for my room, and for my son'.

Depending on their position (e.g. front desk, housekeeping, and laundry) and number of years at a property, hotel workers in Michigan make between \$6.30 and \$7.50 an hour.⁴ Employers automatically draw payment for rent out of workers paycheques, and federal and state taxes, FICA and Worker's Compensation deductions are also taken.⁵ During the busy months of the season, most workers work seven to eight hours a day, six or seven days a week, though front desk workers often work double shifts, generating overtime pay much more quickly. In Michigan, the bulk of the workers are in place by the middle of May and leave by the middle of October. Some workers, however, arrive earlier in April in order to clean and open the properties, and some stay longer (perhaps until mid-November) to close them. They do not log as many hours during these periods but their expenses remain the same, which makes these periods less lucrative for them, and therefore less desirable.

As I mentioned earlier, 20 per cent of hotel workers' wages are automatically repatriated to Jamaica, 16 per cent of which goes into individual bank accounts and 4 per cent of which goes towards the Ministry's costs of maintaining the programme. Each employer provides housing for the workers they contract. While

⁴ Michigan actually has the lowest wages in the country. Though wages tend to be higher in the northeast and in Colorado, the costs of living in those regions are also higher. Nevertheless, some of the corporate-owned resorts, as opposed to the small family-owned resorts and restaurants that are prevalent in Michigan, also provide better housing arrangements and offer workers certain perks, such as the use of the resort's facilities.

5 Because social security and federal and state taxes are deducted from their paycheques, hotel workers also get a tax return back in the spring of every year (they file their paperwork before they leave and receive their cheques in the mail in Jamaica). Often, this tax return can be as much as \$1,000, which helps them to buy their plane ticket for the next year since the Ministry now requires workers to pay half their transportation costs (previously, employers paid the whole plane and bus fare, but because of competition from various private labour recruitment programmes they have changed this policy).

6 While a few smaller employers provide a house for workers in which they share living and cooking spaces but have their own bedrooms, the largest employers put workers up in older motels or dorm-type barracks. This means that they are usually two to a room and share sparse cooking and laundry facilities.

7 The Wal-Mart in the area has since become a 24-hour store, and in 2007 I found the workers took advantage of the extended hours.

the Ministry of Labour has established housing guidelines to which employers must conform (and which are checked by the Ministry's liaison officers for each region), there is considerable variation in the housing scenarios for which workers pay between \$55 and \$65 a week.⁶ This amount is taken directly out of their paycheques, as is reimbursement for any items the employer may have had to provide up front, such as winter coats or sweaters (it is, after all, still very cold in northern Michigan in April). Whatever money remains after these expenses are covered, after they pay for groceries and necessary toiletries, and after they send money to the caretakers who are looking after their children in Jamaica while they are away, is theirs to save or spend as they like.

The hotel workers I followed used a variety of strategies to accomplish their consumerist goals. Many would go to Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Payless, Fashion Bug, and various 'dollar stores' early in the season to see what was available, making several trips to look before buying at the end of the summer. Some enterprising shoppers would put what they liked on layaway (where they could) early in the summer, knowing that because of the high volume of Jamaican hotel workers in the area, many of the items they liked might be sold out by the end of the summer. This was especially the case with items like the 'Bed-in-a-Bag' (bedding sets that include fitted and flat sheets, pillow cases, pillow shams, a comforter, and a dust ruffle or bed skirt), or particular kinds of small kitchen appliances. The advantage to this strategy at a place like Wal-Mart was that if the items went on sale before the summer was through, the prices of the workers' layaway items were adjusted, giving them more money than they had planned and allowing them to purchase items that may have been relegated to 'wish lists'. Some hotel workers bought the same items every year. For example, one woman told me that she bought a particular brand of iron each year, sometimes to replace her own and sometimes to pass along to someone in her network at home in Jamaica. Another bought new bathroom sets every summer – shower curtains, bath mats, towels, hand towels, soap dishes, etc. – because, as she said, her children do not take good care of them so they needed to be replaced frequently. Plus, she explained laughing, sometimes she just liked to have a change of scenery. This woman was particularly partial to the shower curtain pattern that was used in the hotel where she worked, and in 2005, bought a bathroom set to match for her home in Jamaica.

Carlene, a worker from Trelawny with whom I had the opportunity of watching store employees lock the doors of Wal-Mart behind us at 11 pm on more than one occasion in 2005,⁷ had a very sophisticated end-of-season shopping process. Like the other hotel workers, she knew when the various stores had their final sales on summer merchandise, and was willing therefore to travel for the long-sleeved t-shirts and men's dress shirts she knew she would be able to purchase at J.C. Penney's for \$2 and \$3, respectively at the end of September. Carlene was buying clothes, shoes, toiletries, and foodstuffs for ten children, two of her siblings, her

mother, and herself, and estimated that by the end of the summer, she would have spent almost \$2000 doing so.⁸ Because they were allowed only two pieces of luggage weighing no more than 50 pounds each on their return flights, most of these goods were sent to Jamaica in shipping barrels close to the end of the season. The workers paid \$30 per barrel, \$40 for the paperwork to process each barrel, and \$80 to ship them, so they had to keep these expenses in mind as well while they were budgeting their pay at the end of the summer.⁹ In 2005, Carlene needed to buy two barrels to transport her purchases back to Jamaica, but in previous years, she had shipped as many as four.

Like Carlene, other hotel workers also shopped with intricate lists for various people in their own immediate and extended families, as well as for friends, neighbours, and other community members, but admitted that negotiating the demands from family and community networks back home could be difficult. Several workers expressed the desire that everyone they knew could have the opportunity to 'come to America', so that they could see 'that it is not a bed of roses'. They wished that their networks in Jamaica knew how hard they had to work to get what they had, and how far what they earned had to stretch, and that 'just because we're in America doesn't mean we're rich'. Patsy remembered that one Sunday she spoke with her brother and the first thing he said when he got on the phone was: 'I need you to bring me a silver chain'. She told him she could not afford it, and he immediately passed the phone on to someone else. This angered her because since they were speaking just after Hurricane Katrina had hit the southeast coast, she had expected that he would ask about whether she was OK, and whether the hurricane had affected her in Michigan. Instead, she lamented, he just had 'red eye' and was yearning for the material things he imagined she could now buy for him. Josie mentioned that she always distributed goods privately when she returned to Jamaica, keeping everything hidden so that no one would know what anyone else received. She applied this method even to her own two sons in an attempt to stifle any competition over the items she would bring for them.

According to several workers who had been travelling to the United States for years, Portia Simpson, the Minister of Labour during the period of the programme's exponential growth, often told the women before they left that they should save their income in order to spend it on education, both for themselves and their children. Similarly, the Ministry's liaison officer for the Michigan region encouraged the workers to invest what they earned in land or by structurally improving their homes, rather than spending their money on consumer goods. These exhortations showed a genuine concern on the part of Ministry leaders for hotel workers and the ways they managed their income, but also reflected a bias that was rooted in particular notions regarding the proper paths to progress and social mobility. Though the women I worked with did spend quite a bit of time and money at places like Wal-Mart, it is also true that buying consumer goods

8 On one shopping outing, Carlene spent about \$700 on shoes, clothes, shampoo, conditioner, soap, deodorant, hair ties, toothpaste, toothbrushes, feminine deodorant spray, maxipads, panty liners, toilet paper, Ensure, a DVD player, a blender, a toaster, an iron, socks, panties, men's and boys' underwear, vitamins, backpacks, Barbie and Spiderman paraphernalia, pencils, notebooks, children's books, an over-the-door shoe hanging rack, bed sheets, a bed-in-a-bag, bath towels and washcloths, kitchen towels, table doilies, bath mats, shower curtains, silverware, several tins of Spam and tuna, six bottles of ketchup, mayonnaise, a 50 pound bag of rice, and an eight pack of cooking oil. She estimated that before she went back to Jamaica, she would spend an additional \$500 on clothes, shoes, and other items for herself, and another \$500 on items for her mother and her son.

9 The Ministry partners with a company in southern Florida to arrange for the transportation of the workers' barrels, as well as for the air and bus travel of the workers themselves.

was not the only way they used their resources. Many hotel workers were also building or had already built additions to their houses, or had bought land on which to build homes, or contributed to other kinds of structural improvements within the communal spaces where they lived. Nevertheless, they were also *obligated* to maintain the networks that made it possible for them to leave for six months every year, and the most efficient way of doing this was by making sure family members and close friends also benefited from their absence. This means that like Caribbean women who migrate to other destinations, they had to find ways to compensate the predominantly female networks of kin and friends for the work they did to maintain their households in their absence.

While on one hand, the extensive distribution networks of hotel workers may have sapped their ability to accumulate sufficient resources to quickly propel themselves into new class and status positions, bringing goods to family and community members represented their fulfilment of an expectation of migrants that has been documented by several anthropologists (e.g. Basch *et al.*, 1994; Chamberlain, 1997, 2006; Gmelch and Gmelch, 1997; Glick Schiller and Fouron, 2001). For example, Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron (2001) have argued that the Haitian migrants with whom they have worked were obligated to help their kin because of the difficult living conditions in Haiti. For them, a 'morality of knowledge' compelled migrants to circulate goods transnationally, thereby cementing not only family ties but also ties to the nation through goods. As in several other contexts, Glick Schiller and Fouron demonstrate that Haitian transmigrants also enjoyed increased social status through their giving. However, they also point out that by seeking social mobility through the distribution of consumer goods, migrants helped to naturalize dominant hierarchies of status that were rooted in vast inequalities of wealth and influence.

Indeed, an extensive body of research has explored how migration has generated new ideologies about gender, race, class, and status among women without necessarily transforming broader political and ideological economies of gendered, racial, and cultural hierarchies.¹⁰ Yet the ability or desire to consume is only a small part of this issue. Anthropologist Frances Rothstein has suggested that while most analysts have focused on consumerism as the new motor of the global economy and identity formation, 'contemporary global forces and new systems for the reproduction and control of labour may hide the significance of production and create a concern with consumption and consumerism' (2005:279). In other words, she argues, while it is true that low-wage workers increasingly seem to be able to construct new identities based on market choices, and that sometimes this ability presents possibilities for redrawing conventional status identities and class positions, this is largely because new, 'flexible' systems of *production* enable the mass distribution of goods they can afford. Rothstein explains that 'workers can consume what they and other flexible workers produce all over the globe' (2005:285), thereby emulating elite and middle-class

¹⁰ See, for example, Soto (1987), Basch *et al.* (1994), Pessar (1996), Waters (1999), and Parreñas (2001).

consumption patterns. However, because consumption is influenced by structural circumstances, the divisions of class, age, and gender that shape relations between community members 'while elaborated by consumption styles, are created outside consumption, that is, in production' (294). For Rothstein, the focus on consumption and identity has led to a movement away from an analysis of the relationships that are created between the contemporary global political economy, notions of neoliberal citizenship, transnational consumerist desires, and bodily regulation (see also Grewal, 2005).

Though identity formation is an aspect of hotel workers' consumption practices, I would argue that it is not the primary one. Instead, consumerism among hotel workers mainly has to do with reproduction. On the one hand, hotel workers consume and distribute products for others' consumption in order to reproduce the social networks that are necessary to support their cyclical migration. On the other, hotel workers' circulation of goods transnationally also reproduces a particular notion of the Caribbean migratory subject. Within post-emancipation Jamaica, migration became a strategy for survival and socio-economic mobility for both men and women that transformed geographies of labour, family formation, and political possibility among Jamaicans. This is also true of other Caribbean populations, to the extent that for many West Indians, migration has also been a 'rite of passage' that has helped to generate new kinds of political consciousnesses and spatial imaginations, both among those who have migrated and among those who have 'stayed behind'. The Caribbean migratory subject, therefore, has a distinctive status based on specific histories of mobility, and, in reference to the United States, based on particular ideas about 'America' and what it has to offer ordinary Jamaicans. As a result, even though northern Michigan did not stand up to most hotel workers' expectations of what 'America' should be like, it nonetheless provided a space within which they were able to fulfil hegemonic expectations and desires regarding migration, temporary or otherwise, and what it meant to be part of family and community networks that have stretched transnationally since the late nineteenth century.

These workers, however, were not building railroads or canals, cutting cane or cultivating bananas. Instead, in line with the more general movement toward service industries at all levels globally, what the hotel workers were specifically producing were all the services that made the tourism industry in the Mackinaw Straits area viable. In hotels they worked the front desk, the laundry, and housekeeping; in restaurants, though employers could sometimes find American citizens to work as wait staff (because of the tips), they worked front of house, back of house, in the kitchen, bussing tables, and washing dishes. In fact, all the employers with whom I have spoken insisted that they did not know what they would do without the Jamaican workers, and that any time there was a glitch in getting them up to Michigan on time (e.g., the visa cap in 2004, or the increased vigilance of the US Department of Labor in 2007) they lost significant revenue.

Yet at the same time, hotel workers were viewed primarily in instrumental terms, as labouring bodies requiring regulation rather than as worker-subjects that might elaborate their own 'American dreams', either through their consumerist desires or by asking for assistance to be able to stay in the United States to get an education or to find more permanent work. Nonetheless, workers' faith that the US ideology of meritocracy applies to all remained undaunted, and they found it difficult to reconcile this faith with instances of clear failure to provide full access to the 'American Dream' to segments of the American citizenry itself, as will become clear in the following section.

how the 'American dream' forestalls diasporic commitments

There is another way in which northern Michigan did not meet Jamaican hotel workers' expectations of 'America', and this had to do with the anticipated presence of African-Americans and African-American cultural production. In the Mackinaw Straits area, there was the only blackness to be found for miles. Of the year-round dwellers in the two villages where the majority of Jamaicans are placed, only one person identified him/herself in the 2000 census as 'Black or African-American', and I was later told that this person was a Jamaican who married someone in the area and stayed. This lack of 'indigenous blackness' had several effects for Jamaican hotel workers, one of which is that some of the personal care products they use were unavailable. Hermione, a housekeeper from Portland, mentioned that when I visited her in Jamaica during the winter I wouldn't recognize her because she would look so much more put together. She said that one of the things that made it difficult to work in Michigan was that, 'after a while my hair started to get damaged and I couldn't find any products to buy because they don't sell black hair care products here'. Until the summer of 2007, workers were also, for the most part, unable to get particular food staples that are common in Jamaican cooking.¹¹

11 By 2007, the local supermarket in one village began selling a Jamaican spice packet; another began stocking fish, green plantain, green bananas, and coconut cream; an entrepreneur began selling Jamaican food products, cheap cell phones, and phone cards to workers; and one employer found a Chicago distributor for a particular brand of Jamaican food products who

Awareness of these local lacks has prompted enterprising black folk from elsewhere to cater to the women's specific needs. For example, a Jamaican man from Brooklyn drove a truck to Michigan every week to provide Jamaican food staples to the hotel workers. Though he only stopped in one town that was fairly distant from the bulk of the hotel workers, they themselves occasionally managed to circulate his goods through friends to workers in other areas. This man's entrepreneurship created a kind of Jamaican diasporic network in ways similar to the Caribbean networks Alissa Trotz analyzes in Toronto (2005). Her research on Caribbean women who run bus trips from Toronto to New York and beyond for Canadian West Indians to shop and visit family members demonstrates how 'travels between sites of Caribbean migration' has become 'as or more relevant to the cross-border reproduction of Caribbean-ness' as travel to the

region (2005:3). Similarly here, Jamaicanness did not require contact with the territorial space of Jamaica for its reproduction. Instead, it was reinforced through the entrepreneurial circulation of Jamaican goods that are available in metropolitan diasporic sites like New York.¹²

Additionally, an African-American woman from Florida who was living in a town about four hours away from the Mackinaw Straits area sold black hair care products to the hotel workers out of the trunk of her car. Because she had also worked with several of the women during one summer when she supervised the kitchen staff in one of the restaurants owned by a local hotelier, she came to know many of them quite well, both on the job and during the long hours braiding hair. Her entrepreneurship, as well as her time spent, enabled the development of a different – perhaps more traditionally heralded – diasporic connection. In this case, we see black women forging common ground across national difference as they find themselves in the same boat *vis-à-vis* their employer, a very businesslike and sometimes mercurial man who was the highest taxpayer in the county.

Thus, we see that one of the ways Jamaican hotel workers dealt with the various lacks they experienced in northern Michigan was through forging diasporic links, both with other Jamaicans living in the US and with African-Americans. Yet these kinds of links could also be quite tenuous, and were easily dismantled by other powerful ideologies. I began this essay with hotel workers' reflections on Hurricane Katrina because one of the things I was struck by in their conversations about Katrina was how strongly the ideology of hard work as the basis for individual advancement in 'America' resonated with them, despite their own adherence to structural explanations of poverty and dispossession for the Jamaican context, and despite clear and acknowledged evidence of structural racism in the United States.

Jamaican newspaper columnists become an important part of the story here because they formed part of the analytic framework surrounding hotel workers' own assessments of what was going on in the gulf coast. This was because front desk workers or baggage handlers, who because of their position or mobility had access to the internet, read the Jamaican newspapers on-line every day and shared interesting or relevant items with housekeeping and kitchen workers, whose access was more limited. Columnists in Jamaica tended to mobilize the spectre of poor, black folk in New Orleans swimming in their own filth in order to critique the Bush administration for, in their estimation, turning a blind eye to black suffering, and to urge Jamaicans to be more concerned with 'law and order' themselves, that is, to encourage them to evacuate during hurricane warnings (Jamaica Gleaner, 2005c; see also Maxwell, 2005c). Several pundits found it ironic that so many in the US media expressed their shock at the Katrina fallout by using the phrase 'Third World' in reference to American soil (Brown J, 2005; Brown W, 2005; Maxwell, 2005a, b; Nettleford, 2005; Robinson, 2005), since, as

would fulfil his workers' requests.

12 Bianca Robinson (Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University) is currently conducting research on another network that reproduces a sense of Jamaicanness outside Jamaica, this time in cyberspace. Her work among people who belong to the website www.jamaicans.com examines similar issues regarding diaspora and the national specificity of blacknesses.

they argued, US racism was not news to people around the world (Macfarlane, 2005). What was remarkable to people, however, was how bold-faced America's class and race system seemed in this instance, leading many Jamaican columnists to surmise that the Bush administration would never completely recover from its disastrously late and seemingly callous response to the victims of Katrina, and that the leadership role of the US in the world would be forever tarnished (Morrison, 2005; Sanders, 2005).

Many of the concerns that were raised in both US and Jamaican media coverage of Katrina were echoed by hotel workers who also believed that the people devastated by the hurricane in New Orleans would have gotten a quicker response had they been white. Their hearts were moved by the images of suffering broadcast on television, as well as by the brief moment of critical indignity offered up by US journalists and black American leaders. That the suffering was the result of a hurricane held a particular resonance for them, as they themselves had faced similar situations, though with far less media attention. 'That could have been us' was a phrase I heard many times. However, their diasporic identification with black Katrina victims in New Orleans stopped short when they grappled with the idea of poverty in America.

At issue here was a general disbelief. While a few workers felt that the media coverage really opened their eyes, revealing, as Josie put it, that the American government is 'stink and dirty' just like the government in Jamaica, most echoed the media commentators who expressed shock that the images they were seeing looked more like the 'Third World' than the United States. Even after watching the endless footage of New Orleans on CNN, it was difficult for them to poke holes in the ideology that the 'American dream' applied equally to all. Indeed, several workers believed that the people they were seeing were not *really* poor, but because they had lost everything and were wading in water, they *appeared* to be impoverished. 'They are probably good people who had good jobs', Josie said, 'but they were washed out and the government didn't step in soon enough'. If they finally conceded the point that poverty and joblessness are not limited to the 'Third World', but also plague the United States, the way they reconciled what the New Orleans images showed about race and class in the United States with a continued belief in the 'American dream' was through recourse to the American myth of meritocracy. In other words, they felt that it was not that the 'dream' did not apply equally to all, it just did not apply to people who were not willing to work for it. And since they were quite willing in this regard, they could not imagine that they would ever be in the position of the people they saw on television.

For many of the Jamaican women in Michigan, working or not working was seen as a choice Americans made rather than as a structural problem, even though their analysis of poverty in Jamaica hinged on structural factors. 'If I were here, I'd be able to work', Carlene said, in the middle of an argument that people in the

United States rely too much on the government. 'They don't want to work but they want unemployment [pay], they want the government to give them a house.... In Jamaica', she continued, 'there is no unemployment so you have to work'. Jasie concurred: 'What happened to those people will not happen to me', she said. 'I won't sit and wait for the government to give me a handout. I'll work hard. I'm working class and work hard in Jamaica to live middle class, and if I can do that there I can do it here'.

In part, Jamaican hotel workers have developed this opinion as a result of the particularities of their location. After the summer tourism season ends when all but a very few of the hotels and restaurants close their doors, many year-round local residents go on unemployment. For many hotel workers, this kind of safety net caused Americans to be lazy. As Carlene stated, 'The problem with Michigan is that too many people don't want to find work for the year. And even if they only worked during the summer, they don't save their money. Instead they go off and spend it in the bar. Having unemployment [compensation] here encourages people not to work'.

When they turned their analytic lenses toward Jamaica, however, hotel workers had a positive sense that government should be actively responsible for the welfare of its citizens. Specifically, they argued that poverty was caused by the government's inability or unwillingness to provide enough jobs for people leaving high school or the universities, and that job creation would develop the economy and diminish the crime rate. In other words, they saw poverty in Jamaica as resulting from irresponsibility on the part of the state, but in the United States, they saw poverty as resulting from irresponsibility on the part of individuals; when analysing their own milieu, hotel workers emphasized the ways structures limited their agential possibilities, but in the US it was easier for them to see structure as enabling rather than constraining, and they used their understanding of agency to disparage local residents' lack of ingenuity, productivity, or desire to succeed. Because of these beliefs, they unintentionally reproduced right wing discourse regarding 'government hand-outs' and the welfare state. They believed US racism had real effects, but felt that unlike many African-Americans, they were talented and hard-working enough to overcome them.

In other words, it was difficult for Jamaican hotel workers to sustain a structural analysis of poverty in the United States because of their need to believe in the 'American Dream' and the ideology of meritocracy. Moreover, because of their structural and ideological framework, they were not deterred from wanting to migrate to the United States. Even having seen the images of post-Katrina devastation and having heard the critiques of governmental cronyism and ineptitude, most still believed unequivocally that it would be easier in the United States to pursue an education and a career. 'I want to live in America', Stacey concluded. 'There are more opportunities here'.

conclusion

Anthropologist Priti Ramamurthy uses the concept of 'perplexity' to think through the ways global circulations and discourses (and resistance strategies) can never completely account for or explain people's desires and practices. 'Perplexity', she writes, 'is a way of marking the tension between overlapping, opposing, and asymmetric forces or fields of power. [It] indexes the puzzlement of people as they experience both the joys and aches of the global everyday, often simultaneously' (2003:525). In Ramamurthy's own work on gender, labour, and consumption in India, perplexity is a way to analyse consumption as a 'contradictory site for the formation of subjects' (2003:525), but it also becomes a key conceptual tool in the disruption of facile notions of identity politics in which purported samenesses are forged as the basis of solidarity. We might think about transnationalism and diaspora in similar terms – as strategies and tactics that redefine the space of community in ways that generate new notions of belonging while at the same time reinstate patterns of exclusion; as concepts and practices that challenge and at the same time reproduce hierarchies of race, class, colour, and gender; and as historically contingent strategies to advance individual and collective interests whose effects cannot simply be mapped in terms of liberation or constraint.

What I have attempted to show in this essay is that Jamaican hotel workers strove to be transnational citizens, joining the hundreds of thousands of other Jamaicans who have peripatetically searched all corners of the globe for the means that would afford them, in their view, a better lifestyle. Unable to find consistent or sufficiently remunerative work in Jamaica, and already saturated with American media and American products that have created particular kinds of consumerist desires, they developed subjectivities as migrant worker-consumers. As female household heads and mothers (or grandmothers) of small children, this subject status is gendered in ways that resonate with traditional Caribbean patterns of women, work, and identity formation, but that is also adapted for the contemporary global situation and for their own cyclical seasonality. And though most hotel workers cited financial reasons for participating in the programme, many also became enamoured of the sort of cosmopolitanism that they felt was one effect of their cyclical migration. Because they were able to speak from experience about tunnels and bridges that spanned large bodies of water, about tourist 'friends' who passed on information about other cities or educational opportunities, and about both Jamaican *and* American labour policies, tax structures, and governmental bureaucracies, they had achieved a degree of worldliness they would not have had had they stayed in Jamaica.

Moreover, as I noted earlier in this essay, not only did hotel workers already have mediated experiences of the United States prior to their initial arrival, they were also part of creating this mediated experience for others through the consumer goods they brought back to Jamaica. As a result, they were actively reproducing notions of the 'American dream', and therefore expectations of what an American sojourn could do for poor and working-class Jamaicans (if not for poor and working-class African-Americans). They reproduced these notions based on their own assessments of where they were positioned in relation to national as well as global hierarchies. In other words, as Inderpal Grewal has pointed out, the transnational identifications that are produced through consumer culture embody desires and fantasies that despite crossing national boundaries 'also remained tied to national imaginaries' (2005:11).

This is why what I have outlined here should also remind us that diaspora, as several scholars have argued, is not a unified field of experience, and should be theorized in terms of power relations/asymmetries across communities, relations that are about race and nation, but that are mediated by class and gender (Brah, 1996; Brown, 1998; Edwards, 2003; Neptune, 2003; Campt, 2004). These insights are usually applied in relation to the 'borrowing' of particular cultural and political practices among black communities in order to demonstrate the ways this borrowing is necessarily selective based on the global geopolitics of access and availability (Hesse, 2000). In other words, we often raise the spectre of what Brent Edwards (2003) has termed *décalage* in order to make arguments about the place of African-America (with its links to the globally hegemonic position of the United States and American media) in relation to black communities elsewhere.

However, here what we are seeing is that the geopolitical position of the US and the ideology of the 'American dream' is so strong that it makes it exceedingly difficult for ordinary working Jamaicans to maintain a structural analysis of racial and economic inequality in the United States. In part, this is because the seasonal nature of their migration also mitigated their own experiences of US racism. Unlike longer-term migrants, among whom frustration with racism and racial discrimination is well documented, hotel workers constitute a protected enclave of sorts in that negotiating whatever difficulties they face from employers or tourists tends to be seen as secondary to their primary goal of taking full advantage of the opportunity to work in the US. Hotel workers saw the importance of discursive structures 'at home' in terms of how they limited their own possibilities, but 'abroad', because they were able to achieve things they could not at home, and because they did not have to deal with the thornier aspects of US bureaucracies (finding a home, getting a mortgage, etc.), structures appeared to loosen, and long-term residents of that diasporic space were understood to live in a structure-less world, constrained

only by their own bad choices. Their understanding of the origins and perpetuation of racialized poverty did not translate, therefore, to the 'America' of their dreams.

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