



**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES**

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**Unsettling Masculinity in the Caribbean:  
Facing a Future without Guarantees**

**Linden Lewis©**

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**ISBN: 976-621-129-9 Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus**

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Working Paper No.13 is based on a lecture delivered by Dr. Linden Lewis, Associate Professor, Bucknell University, USA. Dr. Lewis delivered the ninth lecture in the series Caribbean Women Catalysts for Change on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2003.

As a Caribbean scholar working at the intersection of Sociology and Political Economy, Linden Lewis presents a thorough analysis on the fluid ideologies shaping masculinity in the Caribbean. Lewis' purpose is to "disabuse the reader of the notion of the fixity of masculinity." He states that masculinity is always articulated in opposition to femininity and argues that "Masculinity cannot be distilled down to some essence, which is universal and transhistorical. A number of social forces, social class, race, ethnicity, religion or culture may intervene in determining how masculinity is practiced and experienced by different men." Lewis' intention "is not so much to unsettle masculinity, but to destabilize certain traditional meanings and understandings of masculinity." In the process he reveals that the status of men and masculinity is inextricably linked to the crises and contradictions of capitalism, a phenomenon that is often overlooked in popular discussions on Caribbean men in crisis. Lewis interrogates unemployment, homosexuality and homophobia, and sexual dysfunctions as key sites where masculinity is destabilised.

In the process the paper provides an ontological overview of the contested meanings of manhood in the region and does so by surveying Caribbean literature and political economy.

Lewis brilliantly dissects the works of Caribbean writers and Prime Ministers to challenge the reader to recognize that masculinity is always shifting, adjusting and regrouping.

With this paper the Centre for Gender and Development Studies is making another scholarly contribution to the ongoing debate of men and masculinity in the Caribbean. The Centre has published two other Working Papers on the theme of Caribbean men and masculinity, Working Paper No.5, No.7 and No.11. CGDS believes that the subject of Men and Masculinity constitutes a critical area of scholarship in the field of Caribbean Gender Studies and is committed to promoting the work of scholars who are willing to push the boundaries beyond a regressive, compensatory understanding of manhood in the region.

### **KEY WORDS**

Caribbean masculinity, heterosexuality, homosexuality, homophobia

## INTRODUCTION

It is indeed a privilege to participate in this Caribbean Women Catalysts for Change Lecture Series, in honor of Dame Nita Barrow, a woman who has made an invaluable national and international contribution to expanding the meaning and understanding of citizenship engagement.

Dame Nita Barrow was also a tireless worker in the cause of improving the lives of women and in raising the status of nursing and nursing education. In addition, and of special importance to this author, Dame Nita Barrow was dedicated to the cause of social justice – a cause with deep historical roots and experiential precept in her own family<sup>1</sup>. This occasion therefore represents a wonderful opportunity for me to engage some of the issues and concerns that might have coincided with some of Dame Nita's interests.

First, we need to be very clear about this phenomenon of masculinity on which we focus in this lecture. Masculinity is simultaneously a set of social practices or behaviors, and an ideological position by which men become conscious of themselves as gendered subjects. Masculinity is therefore an ontological process of becoming aware of societal roles and expectations that are inscribed on the text of the body. Men are not born with this awareness

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<sup>1</sup>Dame Nita Barrow's father Reginal Barrow was a well-known Caribbean cleric, political activist and champion of working class issues. Her brother Errol Walton Barrow was a veteran politician and former Premier of Barbados. He is generally regarded as the father of independence, steering the people of Barbados from colonialism to independence in November 30, 1966, and becoming the country's first Prime Minister.

of themselves. Society must impose this understanding on them, as it does in similar and different ways for women. This is the context in which we can talk about the idea of masculinity as being socially constructed. For not only does society play a determining role in shaping the consciousness of subjectivity, but it proceeds by sanctions and rewards to police the boundaries of the identities it establishes.

In addition, what must be made clear about any definition of masculinity is that it is always articulated in oppositional and relational terms to femininity. Masculinity is as much to do with what men do, how they behave in order to win the respect and honor of other men, as it is about winning the respect and admiration of women. Similarly, femininity is defined along similar lines. What I would like to do this evening is to disabuse you of the notion of the fixity of masculinity. Masculinity cannot be distilled down to some essence, which is universal and transhistorical, much as some would have it. A number of social forces, social class, race, ethnicity, religion or culture for example, may intervene in determining how masculinity is practiced and experienced by different men.

I would like to begin with excerpts from two texts which I believe, get at the heart of the matter of the nuancing of the construction of masculinity in the Caribbean. These excerpts are taken from two of the best-known Barbadian and Caribbean writers, Austin 'Tom' Clarke and George Lamming. My experience of doing research on masculinity in the Caribbean has taught me that whereas the scholarly literature is only now emerging in this area, the creative writers of the region have been more attentive, more perceptive and more consistent in their

observations and analyses of gender and specifically of masculinity than many of the social scientists.

In his 1986 novel *Nine Men Who Laughed*, 'Tom' Clarke writes of a Barbadian man who has been living in Canada for the past thirty years. The story is called *The Man*. The reader never really learns the name of this man in the course of the telling of this story. Clarke notes: "He calls everything his own. Although none of his money went into their purchase". In fact, the man is unemployed, but poses as a lawyer and dresses each morning as though he is going to work somewhere. In reality, he is a kept man; living at the expense of a wife and two mistresses. He decides to invite one of his mistresses to his home for the weekend, because his wife and his son were away visiting relatives:

There were too many prima facie chunks of evidence to link him to the fact of being a married man, too many pieces that could destroy the bachelor image he had been giving Rachel (1986:137-138).

Clarke then goes through some of this inventory that would have exposed his character's marital status: hairpins, nail polish, bottles of lotion, face creams, HIS and HERS towels and matching mugs, etc. In the middle of this mission of erasure, the man began to muse: "How does a home look when a woman lives in it? How does she arrange chairs and sofas and couches and pillows? And at what angle? And how would a bachelor do these things?" (1986:139). The man decided that every trace of his wife and son had to be eradicated

(1986:139). It is at this point, in the process of deliberate erasure, that he reflects on what it is to be a man, or in his case, to be 'the man'.

Here he was, for the last two hours, trying to remove all trace of his wife's presence in the house, and what did he discover? He had come face to face with the cold fact that no smell, no idiosyncrasy, no photograph, no snapshot, no cigarette box used even for paper clips and for discarded calling cards, nothing of his stamp was on his own home. Has he been living in such a neutral way for so many years? How many were there? At least ten in this big old house (1986:141).

What Clarke offers here is a constellation of issues that serves to unsettle certain taken-for-granted notions of masculinity with which we are used to working. In the case of this man then, unemployment, dependency, and even philandering combine to destabilize a particular understanding of masculinity.

I turn next to the work of George Lamming who comes to this issue of identity from a rather different perspective. In George Lamming's phenomenal work *Season of Adventure*, there is a remarkable exchange between two characters, Crim and Powell, which is one of the most intriguing philosophical statements about the ontology of manhood and masculinity in the Caribbean that I have come across to date. Powell, the leader of the Steel Drum band, speaks first in this exchange:

'So I put it to you as one man to a next.'

'Who say I's a man?' And Crim's voice meant what he had asked.

'Is you self say so.'



'When?'

'The very day you born'

'But I couldn't make a noise with words that day,' Crim argued.

'Is words make a note with you,' said Powell, 'like how you beat your drum till it shape a tune, words beat your brain till it language your tongue.'

'Is what that got to do with man?'

Every everything. Till then you aint nothin' but a beast.'

'Some beasts does talk'

'But talk aint nothin' till it ask,' said Powell. 'Man is a question the beast ask itself.'

'All right, I's a man' (1979:15).

This exchange between two friends is rich with all kinds of philosophical meaning. Lamming is referring here to an ontological process of consciousness and becoming. Here, for Lamming, the existence of man can only be understood in the context of the acquisition of language and culture. It is only with the acquisition of these social tools that one begins to understand one's self as a conscious subject; this is what separates us from common beasts. The social is therefore important. I will return to this issue of the role of culture and the emphasis that Lamming places on it later in this presentation.

The title of this lecture warns of my intention to unsettle masculinity. In a way, this purpose is deliberately both misleading and provocative. I should perhaps indicate that what I intend to do is not so much to unsettle masculinity, but to destabilized certain traditional meanings

and understandings of masculinity. For masculinity has never been settled in the sense of being fixed and unalterable. Masculinity has always shifted, regrouped, adjusted or repositioned itself in relation to the specific configuration of social forces and challenges that it faces. Judith Butler perhaps said it best when she asserted: "Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time. . . ." (cited in Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994:40). Men under slavery and indentureship, in prison, in poverty and unemployment, or in other contexts that are devoid of autonomy, have always had to adjust to new configurations of power. I am always struck by the unproblematic manner by which people speak of Caribbean or other men being in crisis, as though they are in danger of extinction.

If we could point to the changes and adjustments in masculinity, then we need to recognize that it has a lot to do with behaviors. To pursue this angle further, we must therefore ask, if gender is largely about behavior, and masculinity is also in part about behavior, can we reduce all such behavior to men? Put differently, can masculinity only be performed by men? Is there such a phenomenon as female masculinity? Or as Judith Halberstam notes, can there be masculinity without men (1998). Halberstam is correct when she argues that masculinity, at some level, has to be extended beyond the male body (1998:13).

Being masculine need not be an exclusive identity. It can involve self-perservations which include behaviour conventionally associated with both masculinity and femininity. Such, of course, is the case with the so-called 'butch', as opposed to 'femme', lesbian. There are

male and female versions of masculinity and, equally, female and male versions of femininity (Cornwall and Lindisfame, 1994: 15).

Having suggested this possibility, I would hasten to add that my talk deals only with masculinity that is practiced by men. Moreover, I am convinced that patriarchal power, domination and privilege, pose more problems for the realization of gender equality when masculinity coincides with sex-born males. Female masculinity is in the final analysis, a marginalized form of subordinated masculinity. In short, I part company with Judith Halberstam when she asserts, "that the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity" (1998:3). This claim to my mind could only be considered preposterous and deliberately provocative.

### **Gender and Labor**

Thought I have spent sometime so far relating masculinity to behavior, I would like to move to another level, and to address an area of profound neglect in most of the academic literature as well as popular discourses on the subject of Caribbean masculinity. I would like therefore to establish a link between gender and labor. If we understand gender relations, of which masculinity is but one dimension, to be social at the core, then those social relations cannot be understood outside of the framework of the production and reproduction of the means of existence. In short, there is an organic relationship between gender and labor. To understand masculinity or femininity, we cannot ignore an analysis of the social ontology of labor as an important category of the status of men and women.