

Impacts of the Extended Transnational Family in Guyana – Maralyne Narayan

Rather than writing for this event from the perspective of academic study, I prefer to ground it from my own current positionality as a development worker, doing field research on youth and issues of care in Guyana's schools. I must acknowledge that I am currently in the second year of a doctoral program, with my research work on corporal punishment in Guyana in its infancy. I would not suggest that I am on the same academic or experiential footing as some of the others represented at this event. I identify as a part of the diaspora, with a limited knowledge of what my parents would describe as 'back home', but with a cultural identity deeply rooted in exactly the practices they attribute, not without nostalgia, to this place. I am part of an ever growing group of diaspora who maintain some limited connection to extended family here, but who also hold the Guyanese identity close. I have studied international development and youth for a long time and as my academic capabilities grew I became increasingly interested in understanding this community that my family left a generation ago. What has become very apparent to me as an outsider with limited knowledge of the context, is that for many members of the diaspora, with their long colonial histories and ongoing political and economic divisions, the racial tension has been understood as an indelible attribute of Guyana, when in fact it is a construct of external factors that can and must be overcome. The culture of Guyanese communities is not necessarily the problem, the problem is perpetuating discrimination and disparity as inherent aspects of the nation's identity. Frequently, culture is discussed in development work as something to be navigated and deeply inscribed in the subjects we work with. However, as diaspora workers begin to participate, there is the increasing need to question the specific attributes of what creates a culture, and how that is understood in these contexts. I would go so far as to suggest that for the external parties entering the context, whenever possible,

hate should not be presumed to be a part of any culture, though political and social binaries may construct it that way in a specific time and place.

As an ethnic and racial outsider in Canada, the notions of pluralism in Guyana interested me on my first trip to a literacy center in Lusignan. For the casual observer and for my family, these ethnic divisions run deep, entwined with a complicated history of politics, economics, and colonialism. Like race issues throughout the world, the race discourses in the Guyanese context are created by society and are constantly renegotiated (Peake and Trotz 1999). However, with a small local population and a continuously growing transnational community that remains entrenched in a historical Guyanese identity, the struggle to redefine race and to overcome these issues is not a localized problem, but one that is contributed to by the international community as well.

As an active development worker and member of the Guyanese and Trinidadian diaspora, I believe I am able to explore the ways in which diaspora communities contribute to ongoing racial issues, and how such groups can contribute to Guyana's changing cultural realities moving forward. When we discuss moving beyond race, it must be with the knowledge that no society has accomplished this, and that it is society itself that also perpetuates these issues. Racial issues the world over are a result of specific political, economic, and at times, social realities that make and remake racialization (Peake and Trotz 1999). For many, this is not a new idea, it is a notion grounded in a long history of race and anti-race theorists that allows me to be here, writing now. Race in this sense could be understood as part of an oppressive narrative to be overcome, yet when transnational actors become involved, race again becomes a defining feature of interactions with the international community.

When the racialized component of a culture is blindly accepted, it is to perpetrate a violence against the people involved. Racial issues in this context should no longer be taken for granted. Though race may always have social implications, it should not be assumed to be a divisive construct that cannot be overcome. Race is and will always be part of a performance that we engage in, and its meaning is as fluid as any other aspect of identity. For Guyana, this performance is perceived externally to be so rooted in “culture” that overcoming it is often considered impossible. However, when we delve into the issues faced on the ground by youth dealing with violence and limited access to care, it is abundantly clear that race is not the issue; that, in fact, the issues here run much deeper. In the lived experience of many of the children aged 10-18 that I have interviewed in multiple communities, their experience of and their knowledge of racism is a symptom of their disparity, poverty and social condition, not a cause of these realities. Some would suggest it is a history of racism that created this disparity, and though racism may have always been entwined with socio-political realities, it is always defined by other factors. For myself, in my research, it becomes necessary to consider youth issues beyond racial division, through a lens of historical context, but moving forward to a reality where Guyanese communities, especially youth, can cooperate on social and economic concerns.

As I write this paper I am preparing data collection tools to utilize for a report on violence in schools in Guyana, for the organisation ChildLinK. Without delving into the details of the work, I can say that for this organisation, based in Georgetown, there was a concern that race should not be a variable in the data collection process; that when race enters into the discourse in Guyanese research, it often overshadows deeper social and economic realities. When the issue was brought up to me, I had to ask myself what discursive reality led to this naturalized notion of segregation that exists in the discourse of Guyana? This is not to imply that

I intend to sweep such issues under the rug, nor to avoid acknowledging them as a contributing factor to the issues that this organisation is seeking to address, but one which must be understood, not as a contributing force, but rather, as a symptom of ongoing disparities, social struggles and political relations that will change, as we, the transnational community, engage with local actors. I believe that too often, in Guyana, the race question overshadows the potential for real improvements by NGOs and individual activists. It certainly limits where and how the transnational community interacts with local populations.

Often, diaspora seek to participate in ways that are culturally aware, but frequently, hyper-sensitivity to race issues can have the opposite effect. Increasingly, we see a shift in international development to focus work around the contributing ability of diaspora communities. With indigenous communities also represented in Guyana, it means that there is an ethno-division that occurs in the transnational development staff and volunteers. Frequently, the local issues are magnified on the transnational level, through the relationships that communities have with external bodies. In Guyana, it means that racial tensions that may have slowly been eroded, can often become entrenched in the institutions that returning diaspora become involved with or through the expectations of external funding sources. Ultimately, this creates a self fulfilling prophecy of continued social stratification.

The development 'industry' or non-profit industrial complex, however you would like to consider the business of development work, began to recognize the growing populations of diaspora groups who possess economic, political and social power unprecedented in past immigrant communities. Many businesses are beginning to see opportunities that diaspora communities have to offer. There are several ways that development non-profits and industry leaders are attempting to harness this power, but one of the most intriguing and contradictory, is

the notion of international volunteer trips, designed specifically for members of diaspora communities located in the Global North. The development industry faces broad criticisms for their short term volunteer projects, most often due to the power dynamic that unskilled privileged youth contribute to developing communities in the global south (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing & Neil, 2012, Escobar 1995, 46.). Several organisations responded to this concern by encouraging diaspora community members from Canada, the USA and Western Europe to work as volunteers in developing nations, like Guyana.

Racialized groups are considered by the development industry to be better at addressing social and cultural realities in their development projects. The diaspora focused volunteer movement has met with less criticism due to the racial and cultural similarities between diaspora community members and communities in which the diaspora volunteers go to work. Members of a diaspora group, descended from the region or nation of focus, and believed to be racially and culturally similar to people in nations of development focus, are often expected to have an inherent knowledge about the community and an increased ability to adapt. Diaspora efforts to support their region or nation of origin are not a new concept, but historically, diaspora support tended to follow humanitarian crises in the form of financial mobilisation (Boothroyd, 2009, s8). There is also the pressure of guilt associated with working as a diaspora volunteer. This leads to many diaspora community members retracing family ties in their work and, in some cases, reinforcing existing racial paradigms.

I can speak to my experience in Guyana and the need there to move beyond an ethnocentric perspective on many issues, and specifically, for myself, in relation to youth and the education system in Guyana. The recognition that problems are not defined by racial tensions, nor third world limitations, nor even economic constraints, but rather by unique struggles that are

faced by youth living in this context, is essential to move outside of ivory tower conversations and improve the way social work is completed in Guyana. To suppose the diasporic positionality to be overly concerned with racial tensions, is to rapidly limit any potential for gains.

Development work often goes beyond the necessity of categorization; suggesting that work done by any outsider is ultimately meaningless, and at worse, exacerbates the problems. However, by decreasing racial expectations in development work, one can begin to address the problems themselves, while indicating, through action, that some issues are simply part of a tradition that needs to be overcome.

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