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SHIFTING THE GROUND BENEATH US

Social Reproduction, Grassroots Women's Organizing
and the 2005 Floods in Guyana

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**Caribbean
feminism
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activism**

Nearly three decades after the implementation of structural adjustment programmes, there are rapidly growing social and economic inequalities in the Caribbean, a situation further aggravated in Guyana by a divided and highly racialized political landscape. This essay looks at how Red Thread, a Guyanese women's organization, draws on women's caring work to ground various interventions that contest the status quo and span traditional racialized and spatialized divisions in the country. Beginning with an account of feminist rearticulations of social reproduction as critical feminist praxis, the essay grounds this conceptual frame in a discussion of the January 2005 floods that devastated Guyana's coastal communities and affected some 40 per cent of the population. It focuses specifically on how Red Thread organized with grassroots women to challenge official narratives of the floods, to make women's work visible and to come up with a list of demands that brought women together across several communities. It concludes with a discussion of the effects of the mobilization, and how it demonstrates a commitment to engaging women as a diverse collectivity through working out rather than assuming a politics of connection and affiliation.

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It is only direct action on the part of the people, your own perception of what is possible, that can produce fundamental change. (Walter Rodney, 1982)

Introduction

The difficulties facing the Caribbean today include over two decades of unmitigated structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), a bankrupt neocolonial state structure, a disaffected population increasingly cynical of party politics, the atomization of social relations, alarming levels of violence and unprecedented levels of out-migration. In Guyana, twenty four years of rigged polls finally gave way to democratic elections in 1992, monopolized by African and Indian Guyanese (the country's demographic majority) voting for one or the other of the two main political parties. This situation has contributed to mistrust, violence, racialized insecurities and instability, while partly providing an easy alibi for the government (securely in power for the last seventeen years) to evade difficult questions about corruption, the continuation of authoritarian practices, and the devastating effects of neoliberal policies. Without denying the very real challenges these present for radical alternatives, this essay deliberately looks for something else, an epistemological shift that is made possible by rearticulating social reproduction as critical feminist praxis in Guyana.

Hierarchical relations underpin the organization of social reproduction, understood here as the physical and emotional (caring) labour involved in the everyday and generational maintenance of life itself. Early efforts to extend Marxist notions of production fruitfully theorized the domestic domain as a key site of social reproduction, foregrounding unwaged work (which principally falls on women) as both indispensable subsidy to capitalism and invisible from its calculations of value (Dalla Costa and James 1972). More recent interventions highlight how the 'messiness' of 'life's work' makes it impossible to sustain abstract separations between production and reproduction, or to see these as occurring in distinct, non-overlapping spaces (Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2003). The crisis of social reproduction under neoliberalism – the downsizing of the state, further devolution of responsibilities to the household and individual level – has also sparked interest in comparative and transnational research that attends to the ways in which this relationship plays out across a variety of scales, and identifies potentially new political responses and actors (Bakker and Gill 2003; Mitchell, Marston and Katz, 2003).

In an important essay that attempts to address this issue, Cindi Katz (2001) reformulates topography – the layered description and delineation of a landscape – as a critical and interested research method that can follow and challenge the uneven effects of globalization by excavating the spatialized

flows and relations that inflect practices of social reproduction in distinct, localized ways. This becomes the basis for generating counter-topographies, in which a particular constellation of practices is scrupulously ‘connected to other specific topographies affected by global processes in analogous ways’, and where the link is forged not through generalizations but through the elaboration of ‘precise analytic relationships’ or ‘contour lines’ (Katz 2001: 1229). This approach adds a critical dimension to feminist situated knowledges, for it recognizes the importance of explicating location as the generative ground for knowing, while simultaneously insisting on situatedness (the ground for/under identity) as precisely that which requires interrogation. For Katz, the insights that derive from the ‘critical triangulation of local topographies [can] provide . . . the impulse for insurgent change’ (1232), challenging us to track *how* such a reorientation might engender meaningful shifts – and by *whom* – that decentre the neoliberal model and offer alternative maps of connection. What are the processes through which a feminist counter-topography might come to life as a radically different oppositional politics?

Cecilia Green (2001) offers a promising point of departure with which we might begin to answer this question, in her historical-materialist and popular-feminist reconfiguration of Caribbean dependency theory. Key to her discussion is an incisive critique of the circumscription of the economic in some of these earlier frameworks to privilege the ‘marketplace’, the ‘law’ and the ‘government’, consigning the informal and domestic economy and those located within it, the working (waged and unwaged) poor, to marginality or invisibility. Green urges us to attend ‘not only [to] the commanding heights of the economy and its hegemonic force but also the nooks, crannies and living networks of the popular and domestic economy and its creative potential’ (Green 2001: 68). It is a potential that was visible in the 1970s and 1980s, in the mobilization of women to protest against the early implementation of SAP’s in Trinidad and Tobago and exploitative working conditions in free trade zones in Jamaica (Reddock 1998), as well as in the tentative efforts of Jamaican women in urban garrison communities to create violence-free zones in their neighbourhoods (Harrison 1997). A renewed Caribbean radicalism built upon a sturdy ‘politics of empowerment’ starts with those who inhabit these spaces, and requires looking with different eyes to construct a more inclusive and dynamic angle of vision that can potentially rescript dominant narratives while itself being transformed in the process (Green 2001: 69; see also Haraway 1997).

This essay takes up this challenge through an examination of how Red Thread, a women’s organization in Guyana, responded to floods that devastated the country’s coast in 2005. Katz’s emphasis on the instability of place resonates with the disappearance of the ground that Guyanese stood on during the heavy rains, offering a template to ‘link different places



analytically and thereby enhance struggles in the name of common interests' (Katz 2001: 1230). In what follows, I shall attempt to trace how the epistemological shift advocated by Green materialized, through a self-conscious emphasis on social reproduction as the contour line for bringing grassroots women together across different communities.¹

1 The material on which this analysis is based draws upon video and unpublished reports produced by Red Thread, as well as ongoing conversations with Red Thread members over the past four years. I observed the second national Red Thread/GWAR meeting, as well as several small GWAR/Red Thread discussions, and was a participant-observer at several of the jointly staged demonstrations. With Maya Trotz I helped design and update a flood-related website in 2005 that also served to raise funds for the Alecia Foundation which Red Thread initially partnered with (www.jouvay.com/guyana). Thanks to organizers and participants in the Remembering a Future Caribbean conference, and to Ashwini Tambe, for helpful comments.

Formed in 1986 by a small group of middle-class women who were then members of the multi-racial Working People's Alliance (WPA), from its inception Red Thread defined itself as an autonomous organization located firmly outside of party structures. This non-negotiable commitment was a local response to the racialized – African-Guyanese and Indian-Guyanese – constituencies that formed the membership and compromised the independence of the women's arms of the two main political parties, and was put into a regional context for several members by the collapse of the women's arm of the People's Revolutionary Government of Grenada in 1983 (Andaiye 2000; Nettles 2007).

Guyana has long had a progressive legal framework on matters relating to gender equality, the combined result of the strong involvement of women in anticolonial and nationalist politics, and the fact that all of the major political parties come out of a Left tradition that has afforded greater – albeit still limited – space to engage these issues. Beginning in the 1970s, and under the rule of the People's National Congress (PNC), cooperative socialist policies emphasizing self-sufficiency (under the highly gendered slogan 'Feed, Clothe and House the Nation') resulted in extensive nationalization and a vastly expanded bureaucracy, increasing formal sector employment opportunities for women, and for African-Guyanese women in particular. Although the role of the state was enhanced as public provider of social goods such as free education and healthcare, the gendered distribution of unwaged work in the home was never substantially addressed as related to the economy or as a key issue for a socialist agenda (Peake 1993). As the country teetered on the brink of political and economic collapse from the late 1970s, it was these invisible sectors that increasingly assumed responsibility for community sustenance, via the growing privatization of social reproduction and the intensification of women's involvement in the informal and unwaged sectors. The introduction of the Economic Recovery Programme in 1986 (the local iteration of structural adjustment, dubbed Empty Rice Pot by Guyanese) exacerbated and in some ways institutionalized (through official policies of state disinvestment) these arrangements.

In a recent essay, Red Thread founder-member Andaiye reflected on the independent contributions of grassroots women across race to the food rebellions of the early 1980s at the height of the anti-dictatorial struggle (involvement in street protests, participation in the parallel economy as traders smuggling contraband food items into the country), which challenged shortages, rations and bans on several items essential to the Guyanese diet.

She suggested that no one in the WPA, including those who comprised the Women’s Section of the party, fully grasped ‘that what we were seeing was a sector of the working people in motion’, concluding in relation to Red Thread that ‘it took fifteen years for two of us who, in 1983 were WPA women, to draw the lessons and to begin to attempt – slowly and gradually (given a far less favourable environment) – a way of organizing based on the recognition of grassroots housewives as a sector of the working class and their unwaged labour as the foundation of the whole economy’ (Andaiye 2008; see also Dalla Costa and James 1972).

Today, two of Red Thread’s nine core full-time members are from the group of founders; the remaining seven, as well as the women who constitute the organization’s expanding local network, comprise grassroots women from urban, rural and hinterland communities. One of Red Thread’s original goals was to build solidarity among women across divides. In the last decade, and through individual associations with the global Wages for Housework Campaign and then Red Thread’s decision to officially join the anti-imperialist anti-racist Global Women’s Strike network as a national coordinator when it formed in 2000, this objective has been focalized through an explicit emphasis on beginning with and politicizing the caring work of grassroots women. Counting women’s work now serves as the framework for all of Red Thread’s efforts to connect across local and transnational spaces. The question of *who* does the counting is equally critical, as exemplified by Red Thread’s unprecedented and extensive time-use survey, conducted by and with grassroots women across Guyana. The survey was intended not only to make work visible and matter in a different way, but to use the knowledge generated to organize in response to identified needs. This shift is crucial to understanding Red Thread’s response to the floods of January 2005.

From Relief to Organizing: The 2005 Floods

In his seminal *History of the Guyanese Working People* (1981), Walter Rodney lays bare the human endeavour that transformed swamplands into habitable ground through an intricate system of empoldering. For the nearly ninety per cent of the population that makes their home on the narrow coastal strip that lies several feet below sea level, ‘mud and flood are essential components of the historical record of Guyanese life’ (Westmaas 2005). In January 2005 this precarious territorialization was devastatingly underscored when a heavier than usual rainy season – indicative of ominously shifting weather patterns – resulted in the most devastating floods in Guyana’s history, directly affecting close to forty per cent of the population. Entire communities lived under stagnant and contaminated water (more

than four feet deep in some places), accessible by boat or the vessels – upturned fridges, boards lashed to oil drums – improvised by residents. The shelters that the government opened offered temporary relief to less than 6,000 persons, leading many to decamp to the coastal main road in search of dry land, food and potable water. Households suffered extensive losses that included furniture and personal effects, vegetable gardens, farmlands, poultry, livestock and outdoor equipment. Of the thirty four deaths, seven were due to drowning; the rest were the result of flood-related illnesses, with hundreds admitted to hospital.

If flooding is not new, the historic damage wrought by the January 2005 rains was amplified by and symptomatic of the hollowing out of the Guyanese state following over two decades of IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies:

lack of will on the part of the authorities; unresponsiveness of governments to warnings and people's plight; political interference and corruption at state and local governance [levels] ... political and social collapse of infrastructure, the fleeing of skills, the hapless City Council, and the slide in civic-mindedness that allowed businesses and householders to drop garbage in the drains and trenches. (Westmaas 2005).

A few days after the floods, Red Thread (some of whose members lived in heavily flooded communities) participated in a series of meetings that led to the establishment of the Guyana Citizens' Initiative (GCI), a loose grouping of activists, community leaders and professionals that sought to develop a broad-based and non-partisan flood and disaster preparedness response (www.gci.org.gy; accessed 15 March 2009). Together with the GCI and the Alicea Foundation (a charitable organization with a focus on women's education, health and 'the relief of poverty, disease and sickness'), Red Thread participated in the delivery of flood relief to severely affected coastal communities, targeting 'elderly people, pregnant and breast-feeding mothers, people with disabilities and women with young children', all categories of persons who they had come to recognize were being trapped in their homes by the floodwaters. At the time, this was an initial response to the fact that none of the relief efforts or official pronouncements was specifically recognizing the gendered distribution of vulnerability or the ways in which women were assuming particular responsibilities in relation to their households. In addition to packaging and distributing hampers, Red Thread helped organize medical clinics, with a team of doctors and nurses treating over 1,000 persons at several shelters set up over two days.

Notwithstanding the importance of distributing aid, such efforts, taken in isolation, ran the risk of privileging charity as the mode of engaging the poor, deflecting attention away from the need to address the longer-term structural

issues that mediated the impact of the floods. Red Thread was at any rate always interested in moving from providing relief to organizing with communities (or at least to linking these two), a position that was reinforced as people travelled to their offices seeking material support. Shifting the terms of their engagement with those affected by the floods emerged as members began holding meetings with women in over two dozen coastal communities. In contrast to the dominant tendency in official efforts in which affected persons might best be described as supplicants or recipients of technical know-how (one symbol of this distance was the television images and descriptions given of relief personnel sitting safely in boats throwing packages at residents wading through chest-high and often stagnant waters to catch them), these sessions reworked the definition of knowledge producers. They were less about information dissemination (even when framed in this way, information was offered to respond to the immediate realities of grassroots women's lives *as articulated by them*, and related to such topics as basic water treatment procedures for bathing, cooking and drinking, garbage disposal, disinfecting and cleaning houses and yards), than about the kinds of gendered knowledge that emerged through the collective process of discussing the floods. One telling example relates to the women's determination to recoup their losses, which entailed making visible the kinds of responsibilities – and the material needs associated with them – that they defined as critical to sustaining their families. It soon became clear that public discussions were framing costs primarily through a definition of losses tied exclusively to income-generating activities, an emphasis that highlighted the absence of grassroots women from broader debates about compensation. Rather than fitting them into existing databases designed to tabulate losses as a basis for making claims, the concept of livelihoods had to be fundamentally rethought to address the women's own accounting of the multi-dimensionality of their lives:

The women's definition of livelihood is everything that goes into the care of their families, especially their children ... we had to redo [the claim form] including their household items, what they used to produce, especially food for household use, and what they used to produce goods for sale or the goods themselves. They did not accept that their small kitchen garden or the livestock or poultry which they used to feed the household should be treated differently from say, the farm of a cash crop farmer. (Red Thread 2006).

If getting grassroots women to meet inside of their villages was the first step to formulating a public intervention, making links beyond one's immediate environment was key to crafting a collective platform. Community meetings distilled the various issues into a list of specific demands that were further refined and endorsed at a public session. The information sheet that was



distributed around the country to publicize the meeting represented a strategic intervention into the public sphere. Situating the speakout within the Global Women's Strike framework (for which Red Thread serves as the Guyana coordinator), the handbill insisted that unwaged caring work produces value, and singled out Venezuela as the one example of grassroots women's mobilization contributing to this principle being incorporated into the Bolivarian Constitution as Article 88. Positioning these issues as a specific instance of global forces and resistant responses offered a larger canvas to map potential transnational connections, while serving as a reminder that within the context of even the most resolutely local, there were relationships across place that could also be made. Moreover, naming the Venezuelan Constitution drew attention to shifts taking place in Guyana's own backyard, providing a most proximate example of what grassroots women could dare to imagine together.

We might read this intervention as restoring a transnational dimension to a reinvigorated notion of the political in Guyana, drawing on a legacy of international solidarity – present during the anticolonial coalition that resulted in the 1953 victory at the polls and also later, during the 1970s – that shaped the experiences of an older generation of Guyanese. This broader dimension is largely absent today, except as a consciousness mobilized in relation to individual and familial migratory strategies. It also interrupts state-focused discourses in which Venezuela is cast as regional pariah by the United States, ambivalently positioned in contemporary representations of its relationship to the Caribbean,² or portrayed as an ever present threat to Guyana's border security. This dominant geopolitical framing was challenged by offering a people-centred route to engaging Guyana's hemispheric neighbour, and builds on Red Thread's ongoing work with the Global Women's Strike and their earlier visit, in January 2006, to the World Social Forum in Venezuela, where they met with women from the Network.³

Returning to the local scale, the handbill foregrounded how survival was in fact enabled by the work of 'the grassroots women of every race who braved waist-deep and even chest-deep flood waters ... to invent ways to feed, clothe, shelter, teach, nurse, worry about and provide safety and a sense of security for their children first of all' (Speakout Handout). Asking why these experiences had been ignored threw into stark relief how existing flood narratives were underpinned by a distorted and narrow set of priorities, framed in discourses that were highly technocratic and that positioned those most affected as dependents. Inviting the public to hear from grassroots women underlined how society is indebted to social reproduction, creating the space for a vocabulary of entitlements.

'Grassroots Women Speak Out: Counting Our Work for Guyana's Survival from the Flood', was held in Georgetown on 13 March 2005.

2 President Hugo Chávez's overtures to the Caribbean, most notably in relation to the proposed Petrocaribe project, have been described alternately as a genuine attempt to forge a hemispheric alliance that bypasses US hegemony, and as Venezuela trying to flex its muscles in the Caribbean.

3 For a brief report of this visit, see www.globalwomenstrike.net/Guyana/GuyanaVenezuelaReport.htm#GuyanaVenezuelaReport (accessed 20 May 2009).

Representatives from the media, parliament, trade unions, government units, local NGOs and international donor agencies were invited, but in a reversal of the usual roles of expert and passive audience, the meeting was structured around testimonies from the more than two hundred women gathered. Small groups caucused and then convened to put together a final statement that foregrounded caring work, distinguished between short-, medium- and long-term objectives, encompassed household, community, national and international spaces and addressed state as well as non-state actors:

- It addressed immediate flood issues (decrying the politicization and uneven distribution of relief; calling for cleanup action and soil and water testing; proposing that persons from communities most affected should be the first to be offered any employment generated by the cleaning activities).
- It went beyond limited notions of flood-related compensation by highlighting how gender, race, class and disability mediated the distribution of vulnerability (calling for a cancellation of household debt; stressing the need to address historic levels of poverty that existed *prior* to the floods and differentiated people's ability to escape or mitigate the damage).
- It raised the issue of accountability (demanding an audit of how monies received for relief efforts – across all sectors – were spent; calling for an independent inquiry and the meaningful inclusion of communities in disaster preparedness discussions).
- It recognized how the crisis pertained to Guyana's structural vulnerability in the international system (calling for the cancellation of Guyana's national debt).

Assessing the Speakout: Whose Yardstick?

How does one begin to assess the effects of this campaign? At a meeting on 9 March 2005, Bibi Shadick from the Ministry of Labour, Human Services and Social Security, noted, in a statement welcomed by Red Thread, that 'it is the women of Guyana who defended their children from disease and death during the flood'. The question is, what did this discursive recognition translate into with respect to the specific demands of the speakout? Livestock owners received veterinary assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture, the United Nations Development Programme provided chickens, seeds, sewing machines and freezers for women in some communities, and schools were comprehensively cleaned by the Ministry of Education. Shortly after the speakout, the government also decided to offer G\$10,000 to affected households, a sum that was not only inadequate in the face of the losses

sustained, but that did not recognize the differentiated vulnerabilities that the women's focus on caring work had highlighted.

There has also been little consultation between the government and communities on infrastructural repair and maintenance, and virtually nothing in the way of a consistent national campaign to engage the public as active participants. Heavy rainfall in December of 2008 once again resulted in floods, with the damage this time spreading to encompass a wider area than in 2005. The water did not remain on the land for nearly as long, but raised serious questions about the extensive monies supposedly spent on repair and construction (there has been little accountability and practically no information forthcoming on such things as how the tenders were awarded; additionally, only the Alecia Foundation and the Red Cross provided any information on the receipt and spending of relief monies in 2005), while pointing to serious and persistent weaknesses in the proper maintenance of drainage systems, solid waste management and disaster preparedness (Roopnaraine 2009).

While the results might be described as sobering when evaluated in this way, Red Thread's own assessment, coming one year after the 2005 floods, offered a different kind of environmental audit: 'In spite of the fact that we didn't gain enough by organizing, women organizing within and across communities in their own interests and with their own perspective is crucially important. We didn't win enough but we think we would have gained far less if we had not' (Red Thread 2006).

This is not a matter of being realistic or having modest goals, but about recognizing the fits and starts that accompany collective political engagement, particularly when the intervention offers something radically different from usual modes of participation. As Cecilia Green notes:

A key tool in the pursuit of empowerment is understanding how ordinary people – women and men – have invented themselves, their lives and their livelihoods, and how they both suffer and evade victimization on an everyday level ... I am not suggesting that with such understanding something magical will occur; politics (and a different kind of politics, in different arenas) has to be built, devised, strategized, organized according to its own logic, not just inferred. (Green 2001: 68–9)

It is important to put the 'results' into perspective by remembering that the speakout was the culmination of less than six weeks of mobilizing with grassroots women. The successes that materialized therefore served as a visible marker of what could be achieved, while grassroots women demonstrated to themselves and others their viability as agentic political actors, through their creation of a space beyond the isolation of individual households and contiguous communities. The list of demands they generated

might best be read as future-oriented, a strategic manifesto that signalled an intention to continue organizing beyond this immediate crisis.

The emphasis on social reproduction also proved to be a very effective way for grassroots women to generate their own analyses. It prompted a reconsideration of income-based understandings of livelihoods, made visible the multiplier effects of the damage by pointing out how income-generating activities relied heavily on a multiplicity of transactions among community members, and highlighted the kinds of challenges women faced (from caring for children to contracting urinary and other infections as a result of wading through filthy water). Specific issues also emerged, such as the invisibility of women with disabilities, the hardship faced by single-parent households, and the sense that the proportion of single mothers was far higher (especially among Indo-Guyanese women) than official estimates (Red Thread 2006).

Finally, this was arguably the first time since the anti-dictatorial struggles of the 1970s and 1980s that grassroots women entered the national political imagination in this way. For Red Thread, perhaps the most important outcome was that ‘the organizing got Indo-Guyanese women from different parts of the East Coast and Afro-Guyanese women especially from Buxton in the same room to interact in a meaningful way and to organize together in their own interest’. The reference to Buxton is important; once heralded as one of the earliest free villages bought and settled by Africans in the post-emancipation period, representing a proud tradition of independence and resistance, Buxton today is more frequently stereotyped as the launching pad for criminal activity and violence against Indian-Guyanese communities (Trotz 2004).⁴ It is important to historicize these contemporary fault lines in order to consider the external destabilization and tragic collapse of a multi-racial, anticolonial movement in the 1950s, which would explode into the racial disturbances of the 1960s and occasion massive internal displacement. Political independence, coming in 1966 on the heels of the unrest and the reconfiguration of the coast into far more racially homogeneous villages, ushered in a period of divisive electoral politics that has been consolidated rather than dissolved with the return to electoral democracy in 1992. Such racialized political loyalties have severely impeded possibilities for non-partisan ‘citizen politics’ (Gray 2007). Against this backdrop, the speakout offered a potential third space beyond the isolation of neighbouring villages increasingly defined in antagonistic relationships of difference. Its counter-topographical praxis (Katz 2001) entailed an anti-racist spatial politics that refused sedimented impulses by drawing other lines of connection across communities that revealed hierarchies within them: ‘We are from all the races in Guyana and from all political parties, some of us from no political party; the flood did not discriminate among us. This is not about party politics but about women and survival politics. Anyone who tries to break us up is against women and our families surviving’ (Red Thread n.d.: 4).

4 One cannot underestimate the difficulties of this bridging work, in the face of deeply entrenched mistrust and interruptions of violence like the horrific slaughter in January 2008 of eleven women, men and children in Lusignan (a village described today as Indian Guyanese), followed by the massacre of twelve men in the riverain community of Bartica less than three weeks later. Residents of Buxton have also been resentful and highly critical of the ways in which they have been stereotyped, of an intrusive military and police presence, and of the unlawful arrest and detention of – primarily – young African-Guyanese men.

Although indigenous communities were not as directly affected by the 2005 floods, Amerindian women were also invited to attend the speakout in a deliberate attempt to confront the coastal-hinterland division and generate new solidaristic spaces.

Out of the flood organizing, a network, Guyanese Women Across Race (GWAR), was established with grassroots women from urban, rural and indigenous communities. GWAR, along with Red Thread members, have since held two national meetings (in the second meeting, held in December 2008, participants came from twenty communities on the coast and hinterland). They have initiated surveys to track changes in the cost of living and the effects of value-added tax, compiled report cards to evaluate the platforms of political parties beyond the election campaign cycle, and participated in various demonstrations against violence, child abuse and the cost of living. In the most recent floods the GCI facilitated Red Thread's meetings with women from several newly affected villages (GCI 2008). Red Thread has also participated in Global Strike international gatherings in Venezuela and Mexico City; at the most recent meetings in London, they were joined by a GWAR member from an indigenous community.

Consolidating the network through these related interventions has not been a straightforward affair. There is no easy assumption here of 'grassroots women' as a homogenized, romanticized constituency, but recognizing difference in the Guyanese context is a tricky proposition that always runs the risk of reproducing lines that are strictly drawn. Red Thread demonstrates that while we begin from where (and who) we are, the process of engagement also has the potential to shift the ground from under us, requiring us to rethink our relationships to each other and revealing territory and identity to be contingent and – therefore – open to change: 'One critical experience of women organizing to restore their livelihoods is that since we are organizing across race, while the women continue to see themselves as discriminated against on the grounds of race and continue to express all kinds of racial insecurities and hostilities, they have also begun to see the similarities in their livelihoods as women who are poor' (Red Thread 2006). Andaiye (2008) puts it best: 'we are not interested in a politics of identity, but a politics of transformation, starting with women.'

Without trivializing their deadly material effects, we might see the floods as a metaphor – in the sense of lessons learned – for the ground shifting under us, for the instability and indeterminacy of politics. Where outcomes are concerned, there really are no guarantees. The process – of meeting, sharing, listening, counting, valuing, demanding – that begins with the caring work of grassroots women, and that has led to the emergence and growth of the network, is indicative of a commitment to seeing women as a diverse collectivity that does not stand still, and to working out, rather than assuming, the politics of connection and affiliation at multiple levels. In

contemporary Guyana, rearticulating social reproduction as critical anti-racist feminist praxis promises an alternative and more inclusive vision than the one that currently shapes and limits the horizon of possibility.

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