1964-2014: Re-imagining the Afri-Caribbean Diaspora: Conversations on the role of place in knowledge construction for Trinbagonians to Brooklyn, New York

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Abstract: This paper uses cultural historical activity theory to examine interview and graphic information systems (GIS) data to discuss the role of place in translocal experiences among Trinbagonian migrants in Brooklyn, New York. Migrants largely depend on the knowledge traditions and cultural significance of traditional activities borne out of cultural historical struggle in Trinidad and Tobago. Migrants preserve culture and learn to navigate and remake place in translocal movement to Brooklyn New York through cultural historical underpinnings.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

This research explores the role of place in the relocation experiences among Trinidadian and Tobagonian migrants to Brooklyn, New York. More specifically I addressed: 1) the role of place in knowledge construction for Trinidadian and Tobagonian Migrants to Brooklyn, 2) the knowledge that Trinidadian and Tobagonian migrants recognize, discard, construct, and maintain from the neighborhoods of their home country to their new Brooklyn Neighborhood, and, 3) the activities of Trinbagonian migrants that leads to transforming their body of knowledge in their new neighborhood. This inquiry also explores the use of the word and concept of diversity (the idea of multiplicity and variety of culture in practice, Tuan, 1977) as a catchall in the migration of Afri-Caribbean people to the United States as insufficient to explain the breadth and depth of information and knowledge that is carried with and among these people to their new dwelling places (Akowoya, 2008, Butterfield, 2004; McCabe, 2011). To properly understand how diversity is displayed, the idea of place and its role in learning for various migrant is explored.

Perspective and Theoretical Framework

The literature on transnational relocation for immigrants emphasizes variations of acculturation and assimilation theories (e.g., Friedberg, 2000; Greemnan & Xie, 2006; Hamilton & Hummer, 2011). In contrast some of these same pieces celebrate the 'diversity' of these assimilated and acculturated migrant groups (e.g., Ivana, 2010; Padilla & Perez, 2003; Saint-Jean, Devieux, Malow, Tammara & Carney, 2011). In literature on transnational and translocal movement for migrants there is a nominal focus on knowledge construction or informal, incidental learning (e.g., Monkman, 2009). A thorough investigation of the literature shows an implicit understanding and application of informal and incidental learning theories for immigrants. However, references to "learning" in this literature are cursory and ill defined, privileging the notion of migrant learning as a burden. In some cases, migrants' native cultures become a shrouded but undeniable backdrop to this new stage of their lives (e.g., Duleep & Regets, 1999; Duncan & Waldorff, 2009; and Flemming, 2009). Further, the burden of learning is additionally demarcated for migrants from the African Diaspora (The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for this study) who must contend with pre-normalized notions of 'Blackness' in the

receiving country (Akowoya, 2012; Butterfield, 2004; Friedberg, 2000; Gratton, Guttmann, & Scop, 2007; Gregory & Meng, 2005; Hamilton, 2012; Jung, 2009)

How do the old and new neighborhoods these migrants occupy, and that also occupy them (Appadurai, 1996), shape their experiences? Scholarship that introduces informal adult learning as an essential part of understanding immigrants' transnational relocation experience (e.g., Iksander, Rordian, & Lowe, 2012; Monkman, 1999) illustrates how researchers can uncover aspects of the experience that migrants deem essential. Examining the role of place in the knowledge construction of Trinbagonian migrants in Brooklyn embodies emergent human activities that include an object and goals that change over time (Foot, 2001; Helsinki, 2004; Stetsenko, 2004). This study elucidates how these diverse activities and experiences can meaningfully uncover knowledge construction practices and outcomes for this migrant group. This is important because the experiences of Trinbagonian migrants in the U.S. are frequently subsumed and combined in Black Caribbean migrant Black American literatures. As such the nuances and diversity of their experiences are rendered invisible (e.g., Baptiste, Hardy & Lewis, 1997; Bonnet, 2009; Boxill, 2010; Corra & Kimuna, 2009; Dance 2007; Feliciano, 2009)

Most importantly, this work repositions the roles of members of the African diaspora residing worldwide away from that of a marginalized people who require knowledge endowment and validation of life worth from the dominant culture (Butterfield, 2004). I do not operate from an intellectual space or place of knowledge, cultural, or historical deficit among Trinbagonian migrants to the US for this study. As such this work places the actors and participants of this story, as part of the African Diaspora, as central figures to knowledge construction, meaning making, and place production (Appadurai, 1996, Somerville, 2007). This stance portrays Trinbagonian translocal and transnational knowledge making as most valid and valuable in remaking and recasting translocal spaces and places. This central position illuminates the questions of importance in how and why Trinbagonian migrants make sense of their surroundings in a new space. By assuming a central versus a marginalized role as a migrant 'minority group' in this study on the role of place in knowledge construction, I purposely position the perspective of this group as central to understanding how learning is carried out. This becomes increasingly important as cultural historical activity theory frames the findings for this work. The perspectives of human activity, especially activities that delve into the role of place, determine the narrative. And in order to unearth knowledge that has been marginalized by some other dominant narrative, I recast the Afri-centricity of the Trinbagonian perspective on place and space as central to this study and vital to the preservation of culture and knowledge construction across internationally localized boundaries.

Being Black within Being Black—A Researcher's Identity Crisis

Growing up in a country where you do not have ancestry but look like the one minority group of the citizenry is an enigma all its own. You are safe until you speak. What are you? Where do you come from? Why do you speak that way? Why do you eat those foods? What is Carnival all about? How do you speak so 'properly'? With these questions, and many more, I had become detached from the idea that all those terms, and all those questions, meant something. Being the minority of the minority is to say that I am performing Blackness and Black differently within a predefined perception of 'the' Black culture. This idea of 'being Black within Being black' may make sense to few who traverse the hyphens of heritage to make meaning and understand how to navigate cultural identity. I strive to explain the central position of meaning making and knowledge construction of this particular group to raise an intellectual discussion on the narrow lenses through which diversity is conceptualized in the United States.

I am different. I am not Black like other Black people. Because not being a normal Black person meant…what? This affects my identity as a researcher for two reasons. One, I come pre-packaged with the notion that Caribbean people do well regardless of any and all circumstances. So if I am not doing well, according to an imaginary but structurally based standard, this causes tension in my perception of my identity and progress as a not Black but exception to Black person. I do not use the word imaginary superfluously here. The standard is imaginary because it is never seen, but always known much like an imaginary friend. Many people of color who are not 'normal' people of color live with this imaginary friend called Standard Bearer of the Being Exceptionally Black. We by no means grew up rich. But we grew up with rich ideas. It never crossed my mind that these 'standards' that I bear come from somewhere, and are squarely rooted in my culture and heritage as a Trinbagonian American. Expectations are rule, and going above and beyond is normal. This made for a very different experience of 'Black' for myself as a researcher that is being reconciled and refined daily.

Research Design

This ethnographic snapshot uses tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008) and general thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), embedded in adult education, comparative international education, and sociological epistemologies (Gabler, 2010). The research timeline spanned over 18 months as I gathered intricate data on human activities and performed continuous analysis throughout. I used Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to uncover relationships and tensions that create expansions in the informal learning networks and knowledge construction processes of participants.

During three months of pre-fieldwork I collected Graphic Information Systems mapping data to form place comparisons between Brooklyn, NY and Trinidad, WI and planned two observatory periods totaling seven weeks in Trinidad and Tobago for 2013-2014. I chose this method of comparative study to identify similarities and differences between Brooklyn and Trinidad and the neighborhoods that participants first characterized as their new homes outside of Trinidad and Tobago. I conducted observations and collected data during two important cultural events in Trinidad and Tobago and in Brooklyn—Carnival.

Second, key neighborhood actors in Brooklyn in the Trinbagonian community (Fetterman, 2009) helped establish rapport and secure appointments and interviews with other community members. I conducted on-site observations in the Crown Heights, Flatbush, East Flatbush and Lefferts section of Brooklyn, as these areas are documented as highly populated areas for Caribbean migrants, including Trinbagonian Migrants. I documented and participated in events explored of where Trinbagonians live and what their neighborhoods and culture are like (Charmaz, 2008; Fetterman, 2009).

Fourth, I recruited 11 main participants through friends, family, Facebook, Craigslist, and from three observation sites within the area. Participants completed one to two semi-structured interview view consisting of 23 open-ended questions (Riessman, 2008) on culture shock, family values, spousal support, and education, among other topics (Bennett, 2004). In addition to giving details about the changes between the physical characteristics of place, participants described the collective and individual meanings of place that shaped many of the choices that they made once in the country. Lastly immersed myself in community activities (building sidewalk sales, liming in the evening after work, talking politics with the men) to reflect and analyze through a cultural historical and grounded theory lens.

Findings

Examining the role of place in the knowledge construction of Trinbagonian migrants in Brooklyn embodies emergent human activities that include an object and goals that change over time (Foot, 2001; Helsinki, 2004; Stetsenko, 2004). Findings suggest that diverse relationships and experiences with and in place place uncover knowledge construction practices and outcomes that take shape in the form of human activity. Some are similar to other migrant groups (feelings of culture shock, dealing with leaving family, and adopting adverse lifestyles). However others remain unique (a firm claim to the local iteration of Caribbean Carnival, steel pan, and Calypso). This is important because the experiences of Trinbagonian migrants in the U.S. are frequently subsumed in literature and histories addressing Black people as a homogenous entity further confirming the necessity for a fresh exploration of what 'diversity' means in the face of structural assimilation and acculturation, which are viewed as 'good' and 'desired' for migrants who aim to succeed in the United States.

Steel Pan of Trinidad and Tobago

The Steel Pan of Trinidad and Tobago is a central instrument in the emancipation of the republic from slavery, its fight toward becoming a republic as well as the migratory patterns of the country to the United States of America. Steel pan was an instrument borne out of struggle and resistance to aid African Slaves in Trinidad in preserving their cultural and historical knowledge, and to forge new ground against the structure of slavery and indenture servitude that demanded the surrender of their language, traditions of communication through drumming, and cultural celebration.

Steel pan was borne as ordinances and laws were passed that prohibited slaves from celebrating culture. When drums were banned, the 'tamboo bamboo' or the bamboo drum, was born. When the tamboo bamboo was not durable enough, instruments were made using all types of scrap metals and glass including parts of motor vehicles, to preserve the heritage of celebration, communication, and learning through music. When drumming was completely stripped and banned from the culture, the steel pan was courageously created. This instrument defied the masters' ordinances because African Trinidadian slaves took oil drums of the masters, used to transport the country's crude resources around the world, to make a new type of drum. This 'drum' would be fine tuned throughout the 20th century to become chromatically scaled unique instrument to be created in the century, arising out of the islands of Trinidad and Tobago.

The significance of this instrument extends beyond it's revered status as the single most innovative musical advancement of the 20th century. The significance of this instrument is that is holds living proof of the heritage of struggle and progress toward freedom and life enrichment for generations of Trinbagonian migrants and descendants. Just as the steel pan and carnival were used to forge and celebrate freedom and success so the steel pan is used to maintain this cultural heritage and knowledge in Trinidad and also to recreate and reestablish a sense of freedom through the new struggle and new progress of Trinbagonian migration to the united states. This is evidenced by the existence of cultural extensions that stem directly from Trinidad and Tobago and are currently connected culturally and historically to the country.

Brooklyn has its own West Indian American Day Carnival, which is celebrated over a week before Labor Day, which is on the first Monday in September, which mimics the three-month carnival season that stakes places in Trinidad and Tobago from the Boxing Day in December, until Fat Tuesday in March. Brooklyn also hosts Panorama, which is the largest steel pan and steel band competition in North American second only to the International Panorama Competition in Trinidad and Tobago during Carnival season. J'ouvert is also a cultural foundation in Brooklyn, just as it is in Trinidad. J'ouvert, which celebrates the official start of

carnival, masquerading in costume, and pure revelry with a ritualistic cleansing in the sea or with water that takes place as day breaks. While space constraints and context generative and driven activities dictate significant changes to these celebrations of struggle and progress, they remain, for over 50 years, the most visible elements of success and progress among Trinbagonians and other Caribbean migrants in Trinidad and Tobago, and in Brooklyn as well.

The Underworld as an example of Nuance in Trinbagonian Migrant Life

With tools for struggle and progress already embedded in the cultural and knowledge heritage of migrants from Trinidad and Tobago this people group began to migrate through out the world and create the essence of Trinidad and Tobago in different lands. However, the nuances and diversity of this part of diaspora are rendered invisible because of misinformation, prejudice, and pervasive remnants of intolerance toward experiences of members of the African Diaspora that were not identified as African American (e.g., Baptiste, Hardy & Lewis, 1997; Bonnet, 2009; Boxill, 2010; Corra & Kimuna, 2009; Dance 2007; Feliciano, 2009; Thomas, 2012). Findings suggest that the history of Trinbagonian Migrants to the city of New York are not aligned with the published accounts for this or other Caribbean migrants (Fournillier, 2009).

Roland, aged 62 described living "in the underground world for seven years" before he gained a path to citizenship. He described the normal process of marrying to gain citizenship amongst his peers. This idea was initially distasteful. However, the presence of people from his home in Northern Trinidad who enlisted women to help him assisted him in his decision to marry for citizenship. Roland saw this as an extension of the familial and communal values that he came to the United States with. This was neighborly. If someone were in need, they would be helped. While Roland's values or rules remained Trinbagonian-ly grounded, the rules facilitated the outcomes of a foreign activity in Brooklyn that would not be considered acceptable by Robert's own family standards. Roland admits this was adverse to those outside the community.

Confirmed by another participant Andre, who told how men particularly were forced into marrying because their Black American counter parts were "told that it was okay to drop a dime on an immigrant. It means that for the cost of making a phone call, a dime, that they would get $50 for reporting an illegal immigrant in the neighborhood." Under these conditions, forming knowledge and practices around migrant-citizen marriages became essential for success in the Caribbean community. While this type of knowledge is frowned upon and criminalized by the citizenry and laws of the country and government, these arrangements often worked well for migrants and citizens alike, because the activity was performed to meet a need of a member of the community and often bridged the interracial divide between Caribbean Migrants and African Americans.

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Discussion and Conclusion

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The endless stories of translocal human activity and meaning making as told by Roland, Andre, and the nine others interviewed for this project show the changes in perception and modification of rules and instruments in life activities formed here in the United States from their lives that began in Trinidad and Tobago. While grounded in Trinbagonian meanings and emotion, the similar rules formed activities that would cause an ongoing struggle as Trinbagonians learned over periods of time to maintain or discard notions of culture and place in a new culture and a new place. Through the historical and cultural significance of the steel pan, and the advent of Carnival, the notions of struggle and progress are expressed through activities like migrant-citizen marriage, and the banning together of African Americans and Caribbean Carnival and Steel pan between Brooklyn and Trinidad and Tobago represent the new wave of progress for translocal migrants and the various human activities that produced the learning

needed fro their continued success and thriving contributing members of their Brooklyn communities. The study concludes that the work of transferring and transposing information between transnational and translocal place constitutes an extemporaneous pedagogy that can be consciously and geographically located. This is opposed to formal pedagogies that while valuable, restrict what persons know to a formal setting. Thus facilitators of knowledge construction in various settings must incorporate critical inquiries in quotidian practice when dealing with place and knowledge. This incorporation is necessary to recognize and facilitate community understanding, cultural preservation, and knowledge celebration concerning how migrants reshape place to live a successful life in their new communities.

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