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*Beyond the Crisis-Generation and the Dread
Instilled: Special Issue in Honour of
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NOTES ON VIOLENCE AND BECOMING:
A REFLECTION ON 60 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE
AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN



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Diamond Jubilee

In *The Terror and the Time*, Paula Morgan paints a picture of a nation brimming with pride in the opening chapter, "Lament of the Unhomely: Nationhood and Nonbelonging in the Work of V.S. Naipaul." She begins by meticulously describing the Commemorative Reprint of the *Trinidad Guardian* broadsheet of August 1962, which marked the 50th anniversary of independence in August 2012. Ten years later, this state-sanctioned and media-propagated performance of progress has held on. In 2022, dressed in the national colours—red, white, and black—the front page of *The Daily Express* marks 60 years of independence with a quote from Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley: "Feel the Pride," in bold. Above the headline, at the top of the newspaper, a flock of scarlet ibis spread across the page, flying all the way to the back of the newspaper, where another quote fills the page, this time from President Paula Mae Weeks: "Not a Moment to Lose."

Only two weeks before, the front page showcased the grim reality of violence in the country, bearing the headline, "Moruga Mayhem," under a photo of 82-year-old murder victim Syllda Mudie, who was shot and killed by a male relative.

Instead of scarlet ibis, in bold at the top of the paper, read a brief statement describing the harrowing incident, noting that "Mudie's son, Derrick, was also chopped on the head by the 80-year-old suspect, who was shot by police responding to the incident" (Mohammed). The headline is a mere dot on the map of despair that pervades the country. By October 2020, over 40 women had been killed over the period of 10 months, despite the documented decrease in violent crimes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdowns. This backward glance foreshadows the diamond jubilee, a year of increasing femicide. Just days before and after the jubilee, news of murder decorated the headlines. Kareen Ramlal was found dead months after her release from prison, where she had served a sentence for the murder of her husband.

Rianna Mohammed was shot dead while liming with her friend. Ashley Morris was shot dead. Marissa Edwards was found dead in a drain the day after her boyfriend, a suspect in her disappearance, was found dead in a suspected suicide, and Kristin Paul was gunned down after witnessing her husband's murder. Yet, despite this growing pattern of violence, we ushered in our diamond jubilee with little to no skeptical interrogations on this "suffocating smallness" (Morgan 81) of an island "teetering on the brink of despair" (Morgan 81), not unlike "gothic films dealing with unresolved murders" (Morgan 80). In another backward glance, Paula Morgan touches on the mimicry of violence from film to society. Maybe we can chalk it up to the glamorization of violence through the heightened normality of the obscene via social media, music, and film. Years after the publication of *The Terror and the Time*, the question still remains, "What can be the meaning of independence and self-affirmation when an entire nation can lose itself in mass flirtation with what Merle Hodge terms someone else's storybook—unabashed and untrammelled appreciation and mimicry of the style of the Hollywood Actor" (Morgan 80). The only difference

between the wild-wild west of the media and the wild-wild west of Trinidad is that in the Hollywood Western film, women and children are usually spared.

Notwithstanding protests and candlelight vigils, violence has positioned itself as a normative stain on our culture. After six decades of independence, the state has fallen under a spell of selective amnesia, relegating the growing pains of society to the margins, all to make room for patriotism and its attendants. As if to prove ourselves worthy of celebration, we hardly give in to any earnest discourse of discontent on statehood anniversaries. Understandably so, as anniversaries are not meant to contend with how many times we have fallen; they are meant to focus on the fact that, in spite of that, we are still alive and functioning, so we pat ourselves on the back. The Prime Minister's assertion that we should "Feel the Pride" has arguably always been part of the praxis of his citizenry, as lack of pride is a difficult accusation to place on the shoulders of typically patriotic Trinbagonians. In fact, it is this national hubris that has propelled us forward into the 21st century as one of the more developed islands in the Caribbean, while also contributing to our inability to adequately combat violence against women and children. Paula Morgan grapples with the profusion of violence in her works *Writing Rage*, together with Professor Youssef, and *The Terror and the Time*.

In *Writing Rage*, Morgan and Youssef "apply strategies of linguistic and literary analysis to a range of real-life and fictional discourses on the theme of violence" (*Writing Rage*). This mapping of violence continues in *The Terror and the Time*, where Morgan fixates on the "myriad ways in which contemporary individual and social scenarios and suffering are rooted in unresolved traumas bequeathed by the origins of the New World societies of the Caribbean" (*Writing Rage*). Both texts hold a mirror up to Caribbean society, in the context of Caribbean literary discourse. The ways in which Morgan unpacks issues such as domestic

violence, childhood trauma, and nationhood and belonging, are not just simply embedded in curious literary analysis, but are geared toward engendering some semblance of a cure for the plague of violence in all its forms.

Some may argue that placing emphasis on fictional representations of violence can be insufficient, especially when one seeks practical answers to questions surrounding the rise in violent crime. However, beyond approaching violence and trauma as objects for analysis, Morgan manages to balance the imagination as documented through fictional discourse, including relevant historiography, all while blending this methodology with clear impartial insight. Although we cannot legislate ourselves out of crisis, Morgan's approach to violence is a potent foundational reference point for legislative and societal action against violence in Trinidad and Tobago, acting as a long overdue bridge between theoretical discussion and anti-violence as praxis.

The State of the State

Trinidad and Tobago has cemented itself as a liminal state, trembling between an economically developed and a socially underdeveloped island. More pointedly, the official website of the European Union defines the twin islands as "one of the most developed nations in the Caribbean (with) the second highest per capita income in the region. However, social indicators lag behind economic growth, and there are substantial pockets of poverty" (International Partnerships: Trinidad and Tobago). To focus on social indicators, crime would be right near the top. Typically, disgruntled citizens aim their verbal missiles toward the government, or more accurately, members of the police service or the Commissioner of Police. Heads of state and policing have roles to play in the fight against crime; however, leaving prevention and cure up to the state's governing apparatus has proven futile time and time again. All citizens should

take part in the discourse surrounding violence and its attendants, especially when women and children are becoming common victims.

We need to take seriously the voices of those who deconstruct the state, whether it be through creative expression or critical analysis of such expression. Pivoting the national focus away from the run-of-the-mill ruminations on policing and politics toward new avenues of criminal analysis can bring to bear new progressive ideas for the future. When cultural critics, observers, thinkers, and/or activists engage in both quotidian and different ways of being and living, it allows for instructive openings, ideas for those in society to consider, and insightful highlights on behaviours we should reflect on. In reading the trajectory of Morgan's work, there is an attention to macro and micro issues affecting the state and the layman, interweaving both with clarity and objective balance. From uncovering the associations between alcoholism and death to observations on unpacking the press coverage of a murder trial to cross-gendered representations of criminal violence, her work manages to be linguistic, literary, and pragmatically revealing, laying the foundation for state reflection and, even more so, legislative consideration when it comes to areas of the role of the media, reassessment of the ways in which interrogating fiction can prove to be useful in examining the root of violence against women and children.

In *Writing Rage*, Morgan cites the *Trinidad Guardian* as reporting the headline: "Domestic Violence: 80 killed in nine years" (Morgan 27). It takes no mathematician to deduce that since then, Trinidad and Tobago has managed to drastically increase the yearly reports of murders associated with domestic violence, with the *Trinidad Express* reporting that "In 2020, 46 women were killed—21 of them in domestic violence situations—representing around 13 percent of homicides" (Boodram). On the heels of this, Roberta Clarke, chair of

the Coalition Against Domestic Violence, upon calling for amendments to the Domestic Violence Act in 2020, said:

We know too little about how the Domestic Violence Act is working. We do not have very basic information on the percentage of orders granted in relation to applications made. We do not know what kinds of orders are granted. We do not know why so many applications are rejected. We do not know if perpetrators are being excluded from the homes or whether abused women and their children are being forced to seek shelter elsewhere? We do not know how many orders are breached or the nature of compliance or non-compliance with the orders. There seems not to be a system of service or data collection to follow up on the protection orders (Strengthening Protection of Domestic Violence Victims).

This was no revelation as much as it was mere observation. Recent history shows that the laws have not been working in favour of peace or protection. The law, which has stood for the past 21 years, has been insufficient in following up on the needs of women who report abuse and request protection. With the new amendments in 2020, one would have hoped that some progress would be made with regard to protecting women and curbing violence against them. However, this was wishful thinking, as the state of the nation has doubled down on recurring atrocities in the face of the newly amended legislation. What then should we attend to when attempting to understand gendered violence? In the framework for *Terror and Time*, Morgan makes it clear that it is "imperative to engage issues of trauma, ethics, and testimony in the wake of historical atrocities and their lingering, intrusive contemporary legacies, which is a major concern of this time" (Morgan 10). We do not have to reach too far back to begin our engagement with ethics and issues of trauma. From the media, we can deduce that even the new amendments have failed to drive fear into the hearts of men set on murder, but how much does the media have a part to play in negatively engaging violence?

Paula Morgan focuses on media representation and what that means for discourse in and around violence. What this proves is that the history of violence against women should not only include the physical and/or verbal relationship between the victim and perpetrator, but as Morgan points out in her scholarly research, there can be insightful takeaways from the ways in which we as a country talk about violence, ways that can directly or indirectly affect how we operate as singular individuals in this small space. As such, when constructing or amending laws, we must look at satellite issues such as media representation, and ask ourselves, how can the discourse be improved?

Why Media Matters

I was either in Form One or Two when a girl in my school was raped in the school washroom by two boys in Form Five. Although a few of us saw the boys being escorted off the compound by police officers while one female officer walked behind them holding the girl while she cried, we only found out what exactly happened to her through gossip. The gossip lingered for another day or two before the incident was forgotten. We carried on preparing for school sports, exams, and class parties as usual, and the girl never came back to school, and neither did the boys.

As gossip goes, the language of violence tended to leave you questioning more than it left you with some understanding of a right and a wrong and ways it could be prevented in the future. I remember a male teacher talking about immorality in all its forms, from how girls carry themselves to how boys respond to it. I remember some girls suggesting that the victim may have lied, mostly because the boys were "good-looking," so why would they decide to rape her? However, what I remember most is the language of sympathy, not for the victim but for the "lost" education suffered by the boys. "They probably get

expelled, so that is it for them, she could go to school again, but they can't." Spoken as though trying to exonerate their behaviour, just enough for them to retrieve their "lost" education. There was little to no intervention by staff or guidance counsellors to act as an intermediary between truth and mistruth or to provide some level of enlightened discussion that spoke to the trauma that will endure as a result of the incident. Many children assume that adults have clear definitions of morality and therefore take cues from the adults in their immediate environment. Those teachers who neglected to intervene and provide some clarity to the problematic narratives being spread across the school, act as a potent example of the myopia that plagues our wider society. 'Gossip' and the peddling of opinions by those with a platform, no matter how small, tend to be digested as well-informed facts by some, causing them to adopt views that allow them to shift their focus away from the wrong committed along with the victim's trauma, to focus instead on a broader matrix of misogynistic and unhelpful presumptions. On many occasions, the type of discourse that existed, gave female victims of trauma the short end of the stick, while finding excuses for perpetrators, or at least making them seem 'reasonable' in their crime.

Today, the media in all its forms take on the role of teacher for swaths of people. The media is in charge of what one may call informed gossip. How love, violence, and their attendant issues are reported, whether by journalists or through opinion articles, can not only inform but also indirectly instruct and construct ideas and ways of being. Biased perspectives in relation to gendered violence that ignore the voice of the victim can devolve into assailing women in misogynist propaganda. It is noteworthy, therefore, that in *Writing Rage*, the chapter titled "Media Images of Love and Violence: Gendered Rage" is introduced with the argument "that the representation of domestic violence may be extremely damaging to the psyche of readers when unthinkingly

magnified in the press, and that informed and reasoned commentary is essential to propelling any society forward beyond such representations" (Morgan 63). This signals an understanding that commentary that is not informed or well-reasoned can work against societal progress; it may in fact help erode progress in myriad ways.

In "Media Images of Love and Violence: Gendered Rage," Morgan and Youssef contend with the fact that "a long history of domestic violence is woven into the social fabric of Trinidad and Tobago" (Morgan 64). In analysing published commentary, they draw attention to "two commentators, one male, and one female," and unpack how they attend to the "links between love and violence" (Morgan 64) in the press. The role of media and journalism is as important as the operations of government. The press is the mirror in which society takes its cues; if the media reflects skewed images, the population is bound to suffer. When the press publishes discourse around violence that shifts from objective nuance to subjective ruminations, we run the risk of reflecting skewed and, at times, dangerous narratives back to a state already burdened with a multiverse of tiny traumas. Although both articles dealt with domestic violence issues, it was concluded that "the two articles demonstrate contrasting applications of intertextuality and contrasting levels of responsible journalism" (Morgan 76). Furthermore, the first article, "written by a female Trinidadian psychologist," offered an attempt at "overall balance," as "it sets up a common reference frame with both male and female audiences," while employing intertextuality to "make a collective appeal at different levels and, thereby, to effect change in the reading public" (Morgan 77).

On the other hand, the second article, "put together by Bukka Rennie, an Afro-Trinidadian who writes a regular column in the *Trinidad Guardian*" (Morgan 72), lacks the narrative balance offered by the female psychologist. His article

"exacerbates loose anti-feminist feeling, it is highly slanted, it minimizes specific references and distorts their representation. It appeals directly to its male audience" (Morgan 77). With this type of anti-feminist, misogynistic commentary from someone who had a regular column in a widely distributed national newspaper, just how many men, women, boys and girls have become exposed to this type of counterproductive thinking? As compared to the article constructed by the female psychologist, the latter works against effecting practical change in the public; instead, it promotes misogynistic thinking, which has contributed to the increase in domestic violence over the years.

Morgan and Youssef expose the slanted language employed by the press in appealing to "the man on the street" in the background of this chapter (Morgan 65). Furthermore, they pinpoint a news article from January 2000, where a father set fire to his home in an attempt to murder his wife and children. The headline reads: "It is notable in this case that Mom escapes but children 14 and 11 die in a fire set by dad." Morgan and Youssef highlight the insidious use of verbs by the press as they identify that "it is notable in this case that children 'die' while 'mom escapes'; the children as victims in the midst remain an unresolved tragedy, hapless victims of a 'love' union gone wrong and in which the emotions of the father apparently exonerate his behaviour" (Morgan 65). Time and time again, the media has played a pivotal role in amplifying voices which revel in controversial and sometimes unsubstantiated viewpoints on serious issues in hopes to make money by increasing their readership, rather than educating the readers.

As a nation, we must reflect on how this indirectly offers excuses for men who practice violence or have intentions to do so, all while minimizing the trauma experienced by women. Morgan would continue analysing the role of the media in her book *The Terror and the Time*, taking it a step further with social

media. In her response to the 2009 *Daily Express* article "Despers Flees the Hill" as "Crime Forces Laventille Panorama Champ to Seek Shelter in Belmont," Morgan attends to the gravity and importance of the responses to newspaper articles as she states that the "online commentaries on this article are also instructive" (Morgan 95).

Legislating how media should be run is anathema to any well-functioning democracy; therefore, this is not the outcome that critics like Morgan and Youssef are looking for. However, what should be on the table is an ongoing discussion about the type of coverage that frames gender-based violence. Sensitive issues should be discussed and published in a sensitive and sensible manner, taking into consideration the impact they can have on a population harbouring people who look to news coverage not simply for information, but for instruction. Do we really want articles shifting blame away from the murderer and using ambiguous language to cloud the crime's severity? As Slobodanka Dekic explains in the *United Nations Media Coverage of Gender-Based Violence Handbook*, "the current patterns of reporting must be changed through appropriate selection of topics that pertain to violence against women, as well as the selection of sources used for the stories and the visual content accompanying the stories" (Dekić 13). This type of measured reporting should also be extended to issues regarding children and marginalized communities.

Foregrounding Fiction as an Insightful Cultural Touchstone

In April 2022, a 307-page report was compiled by the cabinet-appointed task force headed by retired Justice Judith Jones and thereafter laid in parliament. The report revealed horrific instances of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse of children at several children's homes across the country. The release of this report caused past unpublished abuses to rise to the surface after the

members of the task force sought to access the 1997 Sabga report, which had been stifled for over 27 years. Upon political, media, and social rumblings, the contents of the 1997 report were revealed, exposing shocking revelations of similar abuses at children's homes decades before, leaving the population to conclude that violence had been left to brew at the highest levels, leaving our most vulnerable to suffer the consequences of the government's inaction. Paula Morgan's approach to analysing child abuse and violence through fiction allows for far more critical nuance to the location of trauma in relation to wider society. Evelyn O'Callaghan, in responding to Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*, writes in "Writing states of independence: Erna Brodber and Kei Miller" that "fiction engages with injustice and the desperate situations in which many Caribbean people live" (O'Callaghan 44).

Furthering this point, Silvio Torres-Saillant in *Caribbean Poetics: Towards an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature*, makes it clear that there "must be a correspondence between the literary text, which is a cultural product, and the society and culture that informs it. A literary text, consequently, has its autochthonous audience, whose human drama it must address if it is to be considered authentic" (Torres-Saillant 57). Morgan contends with Torres-Saillant's proposition and keenly observes representations of child abuse in fictional narratives, deducing intimately familiar traumas from these narratives that mirror the worrying abuse reported in Trinidad and Tobago. In *The Terror and the Time*, Morgan makes it clear that "crime and fiction make fine bedfellows" (Morgan 218), and more importantly, "literary representations can be productively analysed for cultural, social, and psychological insights into cultures of criminality and their interplay with justice systems" (Morgan 218).

The critical ruminations in *The Terror and the Time* not only offer a sound foundation for the leaders of the nation to use fiction to help probe the criminal

mind in an unconventional way, but as exhibited through Morgan's reading of Olive Senior's "Bright Thursdays", deconstructing violence through fiction can pose "questions about the epistemological significance of psychic trauma in children, its impact on their worldview and their internal sense of being in the world, and their meagre attempts to rescue a shattered self and a shattered worldview in the aftermath of trauma" (Morgan 23). Dealing with the aftermath of trauma is imperative to ensuring that the bridge between theoretical discussion and anti-violence as praxis is built not only to prevent violence but to cater to victims of violence who must operate under the aegis of trauma in the future. Paula Morgan signals the importance of focusing on trauma's aftermath as she understands that "Caribbean authors and countless others too numerous to mention work their way towards acknowledgment, expression, and articulation of new modes of being human in the wake of horrific despoliation wrought by a history which refuses to be relegated to the past" (Morgan 9).

Since the release of both reports, victims of the documented abuse have come forward to lament that in 2022, one of the main perpetrators of the abusive acts documented in the Sabga report has gone unpunished, now holding a position of power in another institution, having been assisted by former staff members at the children's home in securing a new job. Similar to the family unit in Harold Sonny Ladoo's narratives *No Pain Like This Body* (1972) and *Yesterdays* (1974), which "constitute damning representations of horrific, mind-boggling family violence", "family becomes a microcosm of a social group in crisis" (Morgan 9). When we look at the organizational construct of a children's home, staff and children can be compared to an unorthodox family unit. Staff members are legally considered the guardians of orphaned children, thereby creating a default dependency by the child on the staff member. When a member of staff decides to physically or sexually abuse their dependents, this

should be considered a form of family violence, as the inherent feeling of betrayal experienced by the orphaned child is arguably parallel to that experienced by a child toward a parent. Morgan identifies that with social groups such as families in crisis, "the central issue is an existential one" (Morgan 9).

A close examination of the novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo and the socio-political assertions made by Morgan displays how fiction can contribute to the wider discourse on violence and trauma, particularly the way in which fiction gives us a glimpse into the effects of a drunken man unmoored from a healthy mind and what it may mean for those around him. In "From a Distance: Territory, Subjectivity, and Identity Construction in Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*", published in *Caribbean Literature in a Global Context*, Morgan pinpoints the abusive father's point of no return in the novel:

The primary target of the civilizing Christianizing process, Chandin Ramchadin is adopted by the missionaries to better facilitate the process of coercion, erasure, and imprinting. The result is displacement and dispossession, and the internalization of the alienating colonizing gaze. Chandin thereafter lives with deep-rooted self-revulsion and non-belonging. His subjectivity is distorted by the ambivalence of desire, as a site of profound splitting and self-loathing (Morgan 111).

Morgan expands her evaluation of the novel in *The Terror and the Time*, noting that Chandin's "released inhibition created by drunkenness is in part responsible for his initiation of long-term incestuous relations with his daughters and the brutal rape with which he asserts right of possession when 'his Pohpoh' shows an interest in a young suitor" (Morgan 170). Notably, after careful evaluations of fictions such as *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Morgan concludes that "the associations between alcoholism and death in female-authored fictions tend to be cemented in a long history of domestic abuse, which produces

battered women who kill" (170 Morgan). This speaks not just to the fictive imaginings of female authors but also to the violently charged socio-cultural space in which they draw their creative inspirations. Ultimately, the core concerns of fictional representations of recognizable lives which are all engaged with issues of violence can lead to helpful re-evaluations of our Caribbean history, specifically how race, religion, class, and politics have contributed to the creation of issues we still grapple with today.

When policymakers refuse to engage with experts in the field of literary study and production, they will always find themselves going in circles, arriving right back at the starting line each time violent reports cloud public discourse. In considering legislation and policing, in considering syllabi, and the construction of television commercials aimed at violent men and troubled guardians, Morgan's evaluation of fictional representations of violence never fails to deduce the concrete expression of the problem, which is that "the consequences of real-life criminal activity are never restricted within neat borders" (Morgan 219). Thankfully, Morgan's research helps make the chaos of criminal borderlessness a bit clearer, in hopes that the reader—whether a layman or legislator—takes something new away with them and turns that knowledge into a form of action.

In sum

In praise of George Lamming, David Scott writes in "The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming", that "there are few Caribbean writers with a keener sense of the relation between writing and politics, between the moral exercise of criticism and the practical demands of decision making" (Scott 73). Without reservation, Professor Paula Morgan should be considered one of these few Caribbean writers who fit the description

in Scott's evaluation of Lamming. Morgan's critical sensibility has managed to soar past a host of evidentiary hurdles to provide an oeuvre of research that works toward challenging and changing social norms. In this sense, through practical attention to Morgan's work, we can counter the prevalence of violence against women and children, paying greater attention to the ways in which our media operates to work against balanced and sensitive reporting, as well as engaging with fictional Caribbean narratives to help, arguably in a more holistic way, to curb the growth of the parasite feeding on our nation's most vulnerable.

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