Re-positioning Reciprocity: Reflections from a Caribbean Field Study

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Current Western discourses on reciprocity in the research process situate the responsibility, and thus the control, for creating reciprocal relationships within the realm of the researcher. In the author's reflections in this narrative, based on an extended field study in the Caribbean, reciprocity is re-visioned as emerging from the location of the study participants. Inherent power differentials and the researcher's purposeful process of relinquishing the reins of power are discussed.

The reflections in this narrative are drawn from my experiences with the inhabitants of the small Caribbean island of Tobago during an extended field study. The stories are constructed both retrospectively and through journal reflections written during the study itself. In the telling and the re-consideration, new lenses emerge in my reflective process and shine a different light on a standard concept, that of *reciprocity*.

The concept of reciprocity has long held centrality in my consciousness, although I have not always identified it as such. Growing up in the shadow of southern segregation in the United States exposed me to the dichotomous face of reciprocity. It compelled me to seek out contexts that would enable more equal personal relationships across ethnic and cultural lines than I could find or develop in that environment. Years spent working in a civil rights organization more clearly illuminated the value and richness of such connections in both my personal and professional lives. Later, throughout almost two decades of practicing clinical social work with clients, an essential focus of our work together has been to co-construct as level a base of power as possible, despite the manifest hierarchy of such a setting. And, in recent years of teaching university students (another context framed in hierarchy) to conduct social work practice, the concept of reciprocity stands rooted in the center of our conversation, encompassing both our classroom relationships and the students' relationships with their clients.

During the planning for my ethnographic research in Tobago, I examined the concept of reciprocity carefully. Like the associations noted above, that of researcher-participant is often viewed as an inherently hierarchical condition (England, 1994). I would be conducting research as a Western white woman in a postcolonial setting, creating an additional intersection to the power differential. In the process of conceptualizing reciprocity prior to my study, I revisited my own location and preferred identities in the contexts described above. I also consulted the scholarly literature in depth: feminist scholarship because of my stance within that theoretical umbrella and qualitative methodology due to the nature of my study. From these combined lenses—my own hermeneutic developed over years of working with other people and the attention paid to power relations and reflexivity in research studies by both qualitative methodology and feminist disciplines—I felt fairly grounded as I began my research with the participants and villagers in Tobago. For a full discussion of how my grounding in those combined lenses played out in my relationships and work in the study, see Archer (in press).

However, it is the *new lenses* that are emerging for me, retrospectively, that are the topic of this writing. In order to elucidate them as clearly as possible, they are presented as follows: I refer to the scholarly literature briefly and review the ways in which reciprocity in the research process is positioned; an overview of the Tobago study follows in order to better orient the reader to the context; I then present my reflections regarding a repositioning of the construct of reciprocity—first through sharing journal reflections written during the study that provide a deconstruction of the villagers' efforts toward reciprocity through inclusion—

and then, through exploring purposeful ways in which a researcher can relinquish intrinsic reins of power; lastly, final thoughts are given. Throughout this narrative, the names of individuals as well as villages have been changed to preserve the confidentiality of the participants, members of their households, and other villagers.

Current Discourses on Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a cornerstone of postmodern qualitative research. Reciprocal relationships between researcher and researched are viewed as those built on collaboration, empathy, respect, and recognition of each individual's knowledge and experience (England, 1994; Lawless, 1992; Spradley, 1979). They stand in stark contrast to earlier, modern discourses in which the researcher was situated as the "expert" on participants' lives and contexts. However, while current discourses emphasize a more equal power balance between the two, they often appear to situate the responsibility, and thus the *control*, of creating that balance in the realm of the researcher. Spradley (1979), for example, notes that, "The ethnographer seeks to learn from people, to be taught by them" (p. 3-4). England (1994) states that, "The researcher explicitly acknowledges that both people have skills and knowledge to contribute" (p. 86). Feminist researchers acknowledge that power relations are fluid in nature, reconstructed and renegotiated between researcher and participant throughout the research process (Naples, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). Despite this acknowledgement, however, the researcher's lens on power relations is the one most favored in the discourse, as in Naples' (2003) characterization of feminist researchers:

"*A feminist approach to fieldwork includes a sensitivity to issues of power and control in the research process and argues for a self-reflective practice*" (p. 50).

As a Western researcher entering an unfamiliar culture in Tobago, I too considered that the responsibility for developing and maintaining reciprocal relationships was mine. Upon deeper consideration, I have come to understand that power belonged in larger part to the women participants, not to me. This narrative contests the positioning of control over reciprocity with the researcher. In these reflections, I will deconstruct the participants' and other villagers' remarkable efforts to initiate and maintain a reciprocal relationship *with me*.

Brief Overview of the Study

My goal in this study was to gain a better understanding of the social and economic survival strategies of African Caribbean women heads of household (Archer, 2006). Several intersecting factors led to this research focus and the selection of Tobago for fieldwork. My social work practice over the years, in hospital, clinic, private practice, and wilderness therapy settings, has been conducted primarily with women, many of whom have experienced horrific circumstances. An abiding question in our work together is how they have managed to survive and, sometimes, to thrive. My enduring interest in that question led to the core of this research study on women's survival strategies. Female-headed households are the poorest in the world (Chen, 1995; Katapa, 2006; Zhan & Sherraden, 2003). I sought to learn how women among this population manage to maintain their households despite the challenges they face, to gain insights and specific tools that may serve as model and hope for other women facing often desperate circumstances.

African Caribbean female heads of household have been characterized in dichotomous ways in the literature. The first is that of "the poorest of the poor" (Massiah, 1983, for example), economically powerless, and lacking hope. The second construction represents female heads of household (especially African Caribbean women) as powerful matriarchs (Senior, 1991): poor, but strong and mighty, working long hours, making huge sacrifices for their children, and unafraid to speak out against injustice. Dichotomies invariably define the extremes of a given condition or situation. In this study, I sought to better understand the experience of female headship by observing and listening to the participant heads of household themselves. I was also guided by the question of whether it

is possible that these two constructions, poverty and strong matriarchy, can co-exist.

The lives and identities of Caribbean women of African origin, like women elsewhere, are complex. This study was not an attempt to minimize those complexities or to situate female heads of household within a definitive framework of meaning. Rather, it aimed to extend current matrifocal discourses based on the women's own voices. The final factor that led to the study being conducted in Tobago was discussions with colleagues who had ties in Trinidad and Tobago, which in turn led to my connection with resident gatekeepers in Tobago who believed the study to be of potential value to the island at large.

In 2002, I conducted fieldwork for the study in two different villages on the island of Tobago over a period of five and a half months, living in one village approximately half the time then moving to the other for the remainder. Participants included 23 female heads of household selected through a snowball sampling process; data were collected through archival review, participant observation, and unstructured and semi-structured interviews. The intent was that, through these triangulated methods, an acutely iterative and credible process of data collection would be achieved. In the ethnographic way, my intent was to immerse myself in the culture as fully as possible. I had conversations with local people every day for those five and a half months, each conversation and observation contributing to my understanding of this culture.

Reciprocity through Inclusion

As noted earlier, I approached this study from a feminist theoretical lens. From this feminist standpoint, one of my major objectives was to be vigilant about "creating" reciprocal relationships with participants and other villagers. I also intended to honor the key feminist tenet of "inclusion," which requires that multiple realities be a part of any research endeavor (Abramowitz, 1996; Chowdry, 1995; Naples, 2000). Little did I know those goals would be usurped in a thrice by the participants and villagers themselves. For, as I reflect on the villagers' unremitting efforts to develop reciprocity—whether consciously undertaken or not—I begin to understand that their insistence upon my inclusion in their everyday lives was central to the process.

Initially, from my own perceived reality of what immersion in the culture should entail, I set about to be an earnest "participant observer." I lived next door to some participants and within walking distance of the others; rode in boats, buses, vans, and route taxis; bought food at the tiny grocery parlors and vegetable booths; stood in line with neighbors to purchase fish from the fishermen just in from their day at sea; and conducted numerous interviews with non-participants, including educators, business owners, government representatives, fishermen, local villagers, police officers, agency directors, and so on. I learned about this culture from each of those experiences.

Once the villagers took charge of constructing reciprocity between us, however, the term "participant observer" took on entirely new meanings. The villagers included me in the spectrum of their daily lives. At times, I was actively involved in a variety of events; at other times, I was a "witness." I deeply valued both roles because, in retrospect, I began to understand that my role as "witness" to their everyday lives was just as important to our connections as my day-to-day interactions with participants and villagers. By the invitation of local people and accompanied by them, I was included in birthday parties, church services of different denominations, and evening choir practice. I was invited to go dancing in nightclubs, and was a guest at numerous festivals and holiday celebrations. I ate lunches and dinners in my neighbors' homes and cooked for them in my home as well. I took a daylong journey through the rainforest and "limed" (hung out together) at friends' houses along the way. I also attended the funeral of a village elder, walked participants' children to school, accompanied them to sports games and community meetings, sat with them during regular hair plaiting and braiding sessions on Sunday afternoons, and swam with them in the sea. Both children and adults shared their thoughts, histories, emotions, and dreams with me. In return, I tried to be as genuine and forthcoming with them about my own life. Through their relentless efforts at

inclusion and reciprocity, I had no choice but to be drawn into those deep and vibrant human connections and simple life events that can change our lives forever. My life was changed as I was carried along a continuum from my initial location of participant observer to that of one who feels a true sense of belonging. Through the following reflections, I hope to provide some of the essences of the latter.

Reflections from the Journal

In order to provide a sense of the ways in which Tobagonians gathered me into the very fabric of their daily lives, I have selected a few entries from my journal of over 200 pages. I have included reflections in the areas of food, spirituality, work, celebrations, poverty, and humor. While the female heads of household were the topic of my study, I also share stories related to children and men.

Sharing Food

After I had lived among them for a short time, neighbors in the village often brought gifts of food to me, such as plants gathered in the rainforest with instructions on how to make "bush tea," fresh "bakes" such as coconut bread, or containers of homemade fish stew. After this "modeling" by the villagers, it became a natural, and reciprocal, occurrence to return their containers with food I had made for them.

Marilyn's Soup. Just after I got home, Ronald, Marilyn's son, came and told me through the kitchen window that Marilyn was calling me. I went across the road to Marilyn's and there was a gigantic bowl of soup waiting for me. It had a split pea-based broth, ham, dasheen, Irish potatoes, pumpkin, noodles, and macaroni. It was the best soup I have eaten in a long time. We sat on their front porch at the little table together and Artie sat in the doorway. As we ate, Candace, Marilyn's daughter, brought up a large plastic container. Jones and Gail down the road sent it to them. Artie said, "We are always sending food back and forth."

Cassie's Grapes. Cassie, 10, took me into the back yard. She climbed up into the grape tree, took her long stick used for the purpose, and knocked down the few ripe grapes for me to eat. These grapes are knobby, oval shaped, and harder than the grapes back home. They almost taste like apples. Delicious. Cassie is crazy about mangoes. She cannot wait for the "Julie Mango" trees in the yard to drop their fruit to her. She showed me the lime and lemon trees and the avocado tree as well. She informed me that these avocadoes will grow to five times the size of ours.

Carolyn's Sea Grape Wine. After we went through the material from the interview and Carolyn answered the few other questions I had, I began to get ready to go. She noted the hard rain falling outside and invited me to sit and watch the movie with them for a few minutes. I gladly agreed. She asked if I would like to taste some of her homemade wine. Sure. She brought me a glass of her "sea grape" wine in ice. It was very good, sort of tangy but sweet. Jackie, Carolyn's five-year-old grandson who's been diagnosed as "mentally retarded" sat on the floor in front of me and began dealing out cards to me. He would choose the cards himself and give them to me in various numbers, once ten cards, another six cards. I would look over the hand seriously and declare what I had, "Two pairs, three tens," etc. He would make a sound like, "Want this one?" and I would say, "Sure," and he would give them to me. We communicated just fine, although Carolyn kept saying, "You can't understand him." I raved about getting an ace-high straight, and lo and behold that hand kept coming to me. We settled right into our game.

Carolyn chuckled as she came back in and presented a bottle of wine to me. It was in a Cream Sherry bottle, one of the used bottles she said she used to get from the hotel where she worked and then saved for her wine. I really did not know what to say. I thank her, tell her I am trying to make some "noonie wine" (from William's noonie fruit and directions),

and if it turns out I would bring her some. I was very moved by her generosity. Carolyn let me take a photo of her and Jackie on the sofa. Sitting in that spotless living room in a house that would be called a "shack" in America, with a tropical rain pounding on the tin roof, drinking a glass of homemade sea grape wine, and playing an unknown card game with a lovely little boy is another memory I will hold close.

Taking the lead from the villagers, I began to prepare food for them as well:

Maggie. Went down to the pier to buy fish about 5:00 p.m. to cook for Maggie, as her back is hurt. Bought three pounds of Dolphin fish. On the way I took some of the mangoes that Shawn had brought me to Ernest. He was not at home, but his sister next door was on the front porch, so I left them with her. I took the fish home and prepared the fish broth I have been taught to make by several different people (it is an island favorite). I took it to Maggie. She was on her front porch processing and bagging fly-fish. She laughed when I brought up the market bag with the pot in it. I showed her what I had made and set it on the porch table. She looked at me in a long, quiet way and did not say anything. I wondered if it was not all right for some reason, though I couldn't think of any. So, I didn't say any more about it. . . Later, as I left her yard, Lennie was in front of his house and she yelled to him, "Lennie, meet my mother." It was in that way I realized she appreciated the fish I cooked for her.

Food for Marilyn and Artie. Wednesday night - Had told Marilyn I would cook fish for her and Artie so bought 4 lbs. of tuna from the fishermen and steamed it with lots of spices, carrots, tomatoes, onions, garlic. Took it over to their house in a plastic container. I knew they were leaving for Trinidad tomorrow, so decided to just deliver it on their porch and be gone. But, Artie was at home and immediately opened the container and tried it. First, he said, "Julie, where are the vegetables?" Then, he said, "Mmmm, now you cook local."

Spirituality

The following stories may convey to the reader some notion of my experience of being a *witness* rather than a *participant observer*. For it is in rich and vibrant contexts such as these that the latter term is a singularly inadequate descriptor. In my location as witness, I did not talk with others or interact with them directly. However, I felt intensely present and held a strong sense of communion with those around me.

Baptism in Maryville. In the early afternoon, I walked down to the beach for a swim. As I got close to the mangrove trees, I saw a few children skipping stones across the water and just up the hill from them were adults standing in a loose circle. It was a church service, and the preacher was talking. There were 18 people, the women in dresses or skirts, the men in slacks and dressier shirts than are usually worn here. I had planned to just walk on by the children and continue down the beach to the place where I usually swim. But, as I drew closer, the preacher stopped talking and the singing began. I sat down right where I was, which was just on the edge of the children playing and in view and hearing of the adults through the trees. I was transported. The rhythm and sound of the singing was like that I heard at the choir practice in Cocoa Bay. There was only a guitar and a gourd-like cucaracha (not sure what it is called here) for accompaniment. The singing was sweet and simple and uncluttered. The dialect adds a certain quality to the words that is indescribable, but very moving to me. The people swayed slightly as they sang and their movements blended harmoniously with the motion of the trees in the breeze off the sea. It was mesmerizing. Meanwhile, the children around me played on, ignoring me after the first few moments after I sat among them. The littlest girls wore long dresses of chiffon-type materials. The boys wore slacks and dressy shirts like the adult males. Most of the boys were skipping rocks in the water. Every now and then, one of the little girls would lift her skirts up to her knees, pick up a rock, go down into the loose sand, and toss the rock in the water. Two girls about 9 and 10 wore

African print dresses and bounced gently up and down on a limb of the large dead tree I was sitting on. The only notice paid me by this time was when one of the little girls touched my hair as she walked by, something that has happened more than once since I have been here, just because it is different from theirs.

The singing stopped and the preacher prayed. I was just thinking that I needed to get up and move on when the preacher turned and, taking the arms of a young man and woman, started walking in my direction. He saw me and changed his course slightly, but headed toward the water. I stood up quickly, slid past the children, and started to move on down the beach. As I turned, the other people were following the preacher down to the water and they were singing. The preacher and the couple continued walking right into the water and I finally realized this was to be a baptism. I stopped again and watched the ceremony. As exotic as the whole scene appeared to me, with the sermon in the mangrove, the little girls' long dresses, the singing in local dialect, and the baptism in the calm Caribbean Sea, it felt vaguely familiar. I realized that it reminded me of the feeling I used to have when we went to our small church in north Alabama all those many years ago. . . the simplicity and the sense of safety and comfort among people who knew each other well. The people began singing as the preacher led the couple out of the water. I moved on to my swim. A little while later, I paused in the water, looked down the beach to the area where the service and baptism took place, and the beach was totally empty, as if it had never really happened.

Bus Ride from Roxwell. 20 seater. Driver is a large African Caribbean woman with braids wrapped around her head. Got in her seat, opened up the floor beside her where the engine partially showed - looked in, said, "Jesus!"- then turned on a sermon on the radio. She left the bus, returned with large plastic container of water, opened the floor again, poured water in radiator, closed it all back up, turned her sermon up louder, and headed the bus up into the hills with a vengeance. Up and down, around hairpin curve after curve, narrow road, hauling a—. She obviously knew her road. Whenever she started to lose the sermon due to static, she turned it up another notch, determined not to miss anything. We traveled for several minutes at a time with pure static blaring in our ears and nobody said a thing.

An old woman flagged the bus down. As she got on, she said, "Wait, driver." She sat down in the seat behind me, yelled out the window, "Alvin, are you comin'?" Alvin didn't appear. She kept yelling for him. Another female passenger chuckled out loud. The old woman turned around to her and said, "What, you tink dey's no udda down nere?" The other didn't show, so the driver slammed the doors shut and hauled out. About 100 feet around the next sharp bend, the old woman yelled, "Heah he be" - Driver pulled over, woman ordered the guy by the door to take the bag the young boy put in the door and pass it back to her. The pass-over went smoothly and off we went.

Then came the spirituals. Full volume. At "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" several people sang along. I found myself humming it under my breath. The elderly woman behind me sang harmony. Meanwhile, we were squealing through tiny villages that sit right on the roadside. Came to one long hairpin turn and a young man on a roadside bench waved the driver on, as he could see ahead and she couldn't. She never hesitated, just rolled on into the blind curve. Gave him a brief honk of appreciation as we flew by.

The Children

Cathalina. Home after the interview, then changed into a swimsuit and went to the beach. Had a most enchanting time with my friend Cathalina. We sang and laughed and danced on the beach. This is a powerful and precocious child. When I am out swimming and she grows tired of waiting for me in the shallow water at the beach, she stands up, waves me in with her hand, and says, in her strong voice and imperial manner, "Julie – Come. Come." She was afraid to go into the water today as she saw a "fin" go by while I was out further. It was probably the manta.

For all her imperiousness, she turns quite easily into a squealy little kid when frightened.

This day, she insisted that we sing to each other. We tried to sing "Lean on Me" together and kept laughing when we used different words. She finally said, in her clipped British accent with the dialectical pronouns, "Stop, let I sing it for you." She has a lovely soprano voice and sang the song as we walked along the edge of the waves. We both made sweeping motions with our arms to accompany the highs and lows or the more dramatic parts. When we got to the spot where the rocks begin that she doesn't like to go onto ("there's an eel in there") she turned with a sweeping wave of her hands and headed us back down the beach we'd just walked, without missing a beat. She sings solos in her choir at the Seventh Day Adventist church. We sang song after song, from "Amazing Grace" to "Sixteen Candles" and she knew them all, or large portions of them.

It's difficult to describe an afternoon on a beach that looks like paradise, with a nine year old African Tobagonian girl of great beauty and heart, singing "Lean on Me" just for you, in what seemed, to my untrained ears at least, perfect tune. Of all our swims together and walks on the beach, this time with her was a memory I will always keep.

Walking to School. Walked Joni, Victor, and Junior to school this a.m. The school is a long, narrow one-story concrete building with an outside walkway and several doors into the various classrooms. Actually, it is an open building inside and walls have been created with large blackboards to separate the different classes ("standards" one through five plus kindergarten class). I asked Joni and Victor if it sometimes gets noisy because each class can hear what goes on in those adjacent to it. Joni replied, "Every day." The desks are old, wooden, two-seater benches with a desktop shared by the two students. Each classroom has about eight desks, so up to 16 children can be accommodated. The floor is concrete and the building is shabby. In every classroom the blackboards are full of instructions written with chalk; for example, in one room English rules were written out with examples underneath and, in another, mathematic problems and the times table. We arrived about 7:45 and school does not begin until 8:30. There were only a couple of other kids there before us. A cleaning woman was working in the outbuilding next door, but no teachers had arrived yet.

Men

While the participants in my study in Tobago were women, the hands of reciprocity were extended to me by men as well. Some of them became my friends.

Maryville Shepherd. At first sun, I usually take a walk to the beach through the edge of the mangrove forest. I often pass an older man at that time of day, wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and knee-high rubber boots, leading his goats to a small pasture that gets a lot of moisture. I never see him in other parts of the village at any other time. But, in these early mornings, his standard greeting of "Good morning, dahling," spoken in a gentle, yet lilting, voice, never fails to make me feel welcome in this village.

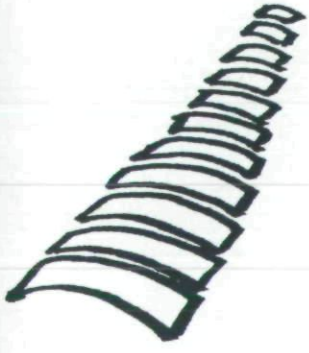
Fishing with Robert. Tuesday - Fishing! I went out with Robert in his boat. We met at the beach at 6 a.m. The seas were very rough and I asked whether we would still go out. He looked at me questioningly, and I said, "Since the water is so rough, will we go out?" He laughed and said, "Sure." I will probably never idealize the lives of fishermen again. The water only had 6 or 7 foot swells, according to Robert, but they seemed, and felt, much higher to me. The boat would go to the top of a large wave, hover for a second or two, move slightly with only air beneath it, and then, boom! down to the water again. We drove hard for five hours through the waves and wind. We never stopped and the engine was never turned off. I pulled in a three-pound Salmon and a 21-pound Kingfish. With the latter, I must have let out as much line as I pulled in a couple of times, and somehow the fish did not get off the line. But I pulled it in on nylon filament as Robert had taught me - with my bare hands, as the fishermen do. I also threw up three times in a row, leaning out over the water, then scooping up some sea water to wash my mouth

out. Robert asked if I would like to go back in, but I began to feel better and we carried on. After what seemed a long time on the water, I asked what time it was as I didn't wear a watch. Robert looked up at the sun and said, "About 9:00." God. I thought it was noon at least.

The men, like the women and children, were also generous in sharing food. The instances below are only a few examples.

Joel. As I was doing some writing, Joel came by and brought me a large bunch of bananas and said, "They need to be eaten or they will go bad." I was thrilled. All the bananas in back of my little house were still very green. We talked briefly, then I went back down into the village at 10 a.m. to try to catch Corie at home for an interview.

Pops. At the fishermen's tables, saw Pops. Said hello and asked if he finished smoking the fish. He said yes and invited me to go with him to see it. We went to the house just next door to the tables, where one of the fishermen lives. In the back, in a shed, there was a large freezer. Pops lifted the lid and there were over 100 lbs. of fish he had smoked. There was more waiting to be brought to the freezer. He told me, "This is how we preserve the fish – now it can be shipped anywhere in the world. But when people around here find out it's here, it will be gone within three days." He told me how to cook it— put lime juice on it, then boil it and add sugar to the water. Then he gave me a large slab! I walked back home, washed vegetables and fruit and put them away, then settled down to try to describe the day's journey.



Ernest. When I returned, there were several pomegranates on the table in front of my house. I knew they were from Ernest [an elder in the village who suffers from partial dementia] because he has brought them before. I was very moved.

Work

I was invited to go to work with several participants in a broad range of jobs, including a road crew in the rainforest, housecleaning, processing fish, and as volunteer food preparer in a local school. For one housecleaning job, we traveled to the house (villa) on a separate island via a small motorboat. In most instances, I worked alongside the participant. In the following excerpt, I was in the role of witness.

Rhema. Tuesday morning - Rhema picked me up at 5:00 a.m. to go to work with her. She has a government job on a road crew, taking supplies to the men laborers. She has had this job on this particular crew for many years. Rhema usually catches transportation to work. This means she gets up at 4:00 a.m., catches a car that goes to Roxwell, then catches a car in Roxwell that goes to one of the outlying villages in the rainforest. Once she gets to the village, she then has to walk to the site of the work, in today's case about a mile. So, it can take her an hour to get to the work site from her house in Maryville, depending on how soon a car comes along and how far the work site is.

Rhema does not say so, but she borrowed this car in order to take me to work with her. I believe she simply did not want me to have to catch cars at four in the morning and then again back home. I feel chagrined not to have realized that, and, in fact, it probably would have done me good to experience it the way she does. Nevertheless, it was a very kind gesture on Rhema's part.

It was a delightful experience zooming through the countryside (Rhema drives very fast) in the early morning dark, with the windows open, calypso music playing on the radio, and very few cars on the road. Rhema stopped to pick up a man who was headed to his government job. He handed her some change, as is the custom, she took it over her shoulder, and put it in her purse on the floor. I realized that was the first time I have ridden with a woman driver since being in Tobago! I have heard there are one or two women taxi drivers around Roxwell, but I have never seen them.

As we rode through Queen's Bay, she pointed out the house her ex-husband built and she lived in with him. Rhema said he beat her when they lived together. He remarried and lives with his wife there now. After she left him, she ran into him a couple of times and he acted as if he didn't know her. So, she began doing the same thing, and does so to this day if she passes him.

Rhema wore a black halter top with thin straps, jeans, and no shoes while driving. At the spot where we parked, she put on a lightweight jacket because it looked like rain, socks, and hiking boots. She gathered her water container and put her purse in the trunk of the car. I wore long pants, a short-sleeved shirt, and my sports sandals because I did not bring boots to Tobago. I had left my socks in Maryville, so my feet were bare. We began to walk down the steep road to the work site.

I looked around me as we walked. We were right in the middle of the rainforest and it was lush and humid and green, green, green. In a short time we ran into her supervisor, Marcus. He is a tall, slender, amiable man, about mid-forties. He chuckled when he saw me, and Rhema explained that I just wanted to see where she works. He saw my feet and said I should wait at the top because of the mud. I laughed and we started walking. It was indeed muddy as it had just stopped raining there, and mud gathered slowly on our shoes. He said to me, "You want to go down there?" I said, "MmHmm" with emphasis and nodded my head. In a couple of minutes, he said something to Rhema I didn't catch.

Rhema turned to me and said, "He's worried about you catching a cold." I told him, "I'm strong," and he laughed. The mosquitos were all around our heads, but did not land as long as we kept walking.

There are seven men who work on this crew, the male supervisor, Rhema, and Daverne, the time checker. They must cover a specific distance every day, cutting back weeds and growth with machetes and hoes. The supervisor had a long tape measure and I watched him measure off a distance. When this amount of work is completed, the crew can go home, whether it is a couple of hours or several. It is called "Task Work." This road is more like a maintenance road and there was no traffic on it today at all. Service vehicles use it as well as hunters.

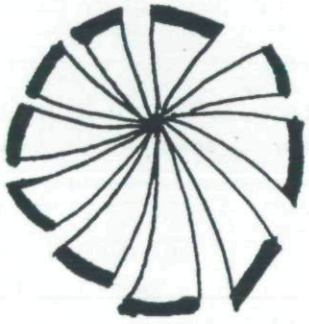
Within about 200 yards, we passed the first group of three men. They were cordial and did not act overly surprised to see a strange white woman on the job. We walked on down to the rest of the crew, a total distance of about a half mile (in addition to the mile or so Rhema would have had to walk on any other day when she did not have a car). We chatted briefly with a couple of the men and Rhema delivered supplies to several of them. Then we started back up the road. This is a very physical job. The crew members work outside every day and have no protection from the weather, including the driving tropical rains that soak you to the bone. They often work in areas where the hills are very steep, like this one, and she has to walk up and down, never sitting. There are no toilet facilities. I asked Rhema if we were going back down to take supplies to the others and she said no, that Marcus had told her to bring me back to the top and wait there for the men. About a half hour later, Marcus came up and said the men had finished and had walked out the other side. Rhema's job was finished for today. She said that normally she would stay down with the men.

On the way Rhema found a cocoa for me that she had to go off the road and scramble down the hill to reach. She brought it back up and began to knock it against a tree to break it open. It fell out of her hand and went rolling back down the hill. We laughed a lot at the cocoa's determination "not to be seen," as Rhema said. Finding another one on the side of the road was difficult, as the parrots had eaten them all. Parrots flew in pairs above us as we walked. Cocricos called out on both sides. Rhema picked up a dried "trumpet tree" leaf for me, a large brown leaf that curls in on itself slightly, and is painted at holidays and used for decorations.

Further on, she spotted a cocoa that was not quite ripe. This time it was about 20 yards off the road and down a steep hill in the forest. As she pulled herself back up to the road, I asked if she wanted a hand. She said, "No, I'm strong too," and laughed. Rhema burst the cocoa open for me to see the nuts inside

and showed me how to eat them. It was an interesting texture even though not ripe. We got to the top to the car and Daverne walked up. She is the checker. She takes everyone's times down, has them sign the sheet, then turns in the times each fortnight so they can get paid. She was concerned about Richard, one of the crew, and asked Rhema how long he had been there. Rhema told me later that he sometimes causes trouble and does not want to work. Rhema and Daverne also talked about the current political situation and the possibility of Panday joining forces with the third party. That was a discussion I was able to take part in.

As we drove back down the road, Rhema saw some plants whose leaves are used to make bush tea and she stopped and picked some for me. They are known to be good for colds and general well-being. Rhema then drove me back to my place. I thanked her and told her, "I really enjoyed this morning. I wouldn't have missed it for the world." She had not heard that expression before. I explained it to her and she said she liked it.



Chores and Celebrations

Merlene's Party. Saturday night - to Merlene's at 6 p.m to help her get ready for the birthday party she gave for Kitty as she expected guests about 7:30 or 8:00. Worked hard in the kitchen with the others most of the night. The first job I was given was to make the KoolAid. In at least a gallon of water went three packets of KoolAid, one pint of rapefruit juice, and lots of sugar. Jenny, Merlene's daughter, stood and handed me each package of KoolAid, I stirred it into the water in the large bucket, and then she took the empty packet from me and gave me the next.

Then, Merlene asked if I thought I could handle helping with the dumplings and of course I said yes. I must have rolled about a million dumplings to the others' five million. We all laughed at my first thousand as they were not nearly so smooth as Merlene's and the others'. Then, at one point, Merlene said, "I can't tell them apart, yours and mine." I gave her a high five and she returned it. The dumplings were made into balls, then when ready for cooking, the next step was to flatten them out like pancakes, about 4" in diameter. These flattened pieces were cut in half and boiled over the fire. Then, they were brought back into the kitchen, large pan by pan, and Ronald and I washed the "slime" off them and put them onto a large platter. Ronald and Will cooked the chicken over the open fire outside the kitchen door. Both of them had great problems with the smoke in their eyes as the space outside the door (blocked in by trees) was small. I brought them eyedrops from my place and they said they had never used them before, so I showed them how. They both expressed relief after using them. Portions of the chicken and dumplings were placed on Styrofoam plates and served to the guests. I then began washing the plates as they came in and they were refilled for someone else and went back out again. I must have washed a hundred plates – or many plates a hundred times. I don't know how many people Merlene fed that night but it was at least that many. At the last birthday party I went to, crab was served to the adults as well as chicken. There was also cassava and coo coo. I will have to find out who and what determines what is served, whether finances alone, or other factors.

At this party, as at the last, the women came first with young children, then some adolescents trickled in, then older teenagers, and finally the adult men. When I left at 11:30 p.m., a whole new group of people had just arrived, mainly young couples who had left their children sleeping at home with another adult to oversee them, and I was told today by Kitty when I saw her on the road that the party went on until 3:00 a.m.

Poverty

Tobago is a popular tourist destination for visitors from other Caribbean countries and from around the world. The participants in this study, their families, and the majority of their neighbors do not stay overnight in luxurious suites at the grand resorts and spas, nor do they dine out in the restaurants and trendy tourist cafes. The cost of two nights' lodging in a medium-priced hotel is more than most of them earn in a month's salary. The majority of participants voiced that there are sometimes days when there is no food in the house for themselves and their children because there is no money to buy it. Being invited to share the true substance of their lives meant being a witness to the extent of their poverty as well.

Ada's House. Ada's house is a tiny, box-like, clapboard house with faded and peeling paint in the poorest area of the village. The house, approximately 18 feet by 18 feet, sits on low stilts. There is no grass around the house, just bare dirt. Three cracked and crooked wooden steps lead up to the platform porch that is about 3 feet x 3 feet and not covered. Four sets of well-worn "flip-flops" are lined up neatly on the steps, one pair obviously an adult's, the others belonging to three lovely children who meet me at the door. The fourth has gone to his father's house for the day.

Ada is standing in the kitchen, which is right inside the front door, and invites me in. The front room of the house is about 6 feet by 18 feet, long and narrow like a wide hallway, and consists of the kitchen and a sitting area. In the sitting area, a small sofa and two chairs are squeezed into the space along with a tall cabinet that holds sets of plastic bowls, a bouquet of plastic flowers, and a radio that is playing calypso music. The kitchen comprises about four feet by six feet. On one side of the kitchen is the front door in which I came (the only door to the house) and on the opposite side is the door to the large bedroom in which Ada and her four children sleep. The kitchen consists of a stove, an icebox (about 2 feet wide, 18 inches deep and 18 inches high) and a table about 3 ½ feet long. The middle of the table holds a drainer with clean dishes in it, and various sizes of plastic containers of water are on and below it at one end. The other end of the table is where Ada does her food preparation.

The one and only light in the house is a single light bulb on the wall above the table. There is no running water. Ada hauls in water from the neighbor's standpipe in the plastic containers that sit under the table. She and the children share an outdoor toilet with neighbors. She washes clothes at the neighbors' standpipe or at the creek nearby. She hangs the clothes under the house. In order to do this, she must bend over almost double because the stilts on which the house sits are only about five feet high. Because the section under the house is open on three sides, the wind and rain whoosh through without interruption. In the rainy season, Ada says, it often takes several days for clothes to dry. Ada pays approximately $17USD per month for this house. Her income is more than 80% below the poverty line and she does not have hope of moving into a more comfortable house any time in the near future.

Being a witness to the poverty also meant awareness of sharp contrasts that tourists missed:

Carl and the Visitors. My friend Carl lives in a one-room shack with no electricity or running water and tends goats for his meager existence. I was struck by the scene this morning of Carl walking two goats close to the small fishing pier, wearing the same plaid shirt he wears every day, just as a group of Asian tourists disembarked from a large party boat they hired at the beach near the airport. They heard there is a fete this afternoon and they wish to attend.

Dion's Shoes. I stopped at Venita's small parlor to chat before noon but she was away. Two tourists from Germany dropped in to buy snacks for their scuba diving trip. Then they jumped into their rented four-wheel-drive jeep and drove away. I looked at Maggie's son, Dion, the 17-year-old boy behind the counter, who is over six feet tall and still growing. And, in my mind's eye, I pictured Dion's shoes, which are worn and ripped so badly he can hardly keep them on his feet when he walks.

Humor

Of all that I was invited to share, being included in local humor ranked right at the top of my list.

From Silliness with Del & Grace... At one point, as we discussed staying in touch after I return to the U.S., Del said, "Leave us your address. I will write you a letter." As we talked, he repeated it, jovially, "Yes, I will write you a letter." And Grace piped in, "And what will you say in this letter, 'I Love You'?" We all laughed and I added, "My dearest darling," and we laughed harder.

...To Lennie's Little White Lie...Met Lennie walking toward me on the beach road. He had a bag over his shoulder whose contents were long and narrow. It looked suspiciously like the shape of an iguana, illegal to hunt on the island. I said, "Hi Lennie. What's in the bag?"After only the briefest pause, and with a straight face, he answered, "Driftwood." I just grinned and said, "Okay." He laughed out loud as he kept walking.

...and on to Elizabeth's Quintessential Tobagonian Humor... As I stood with Elizabeth waiting for the bus that would take us to the market in Roxwell, Elizabeth spotted her friend Addie up the hill on her front porch. Elizabeth called a greeting to her. When Addie had not heard, Elizabeth yelled again, "Addie, aren't you saying hello this morning?" Again, no response. Finally, in local dialect, Elizabeth shouted at the top of her voice, much to the delight of bystanders: "What, you tink I kill your mudda?"

Purposefully Relinquishing the Reins of Power

There is an intrinsic power differential in the qualitative researcher's ability to construct the participant's life story when, presumably, the participant does not construct the life story of the researcher for academic or other purposes. Is it possible that participants' taking charge of the reciprocity building process, as in the events and actions described above, serves to level the playing field, thus generating a more equal balance of power? *I believe it is possible, provided that the researcher is willing to relinquish the reins of power that is intrinsic to the role.* If there is a moral to be crafted from this writing, for social work researchers and those of other disciplines, I believe it is most evident within this metaphor. As I reflect on my own process of relinquishing the reins, I realize that I utilized both my own hermeneutic regarding reciprocity, grounded in life experiences and my feminist theoretical location, as well as my intuitive responses to the efforts of the participants to engage me in their lives. Perhaps the following illustrations will help to de-construct my process.

Awareness of Intrinsic Power

As a first step, I allowed myself to recognize and be continually aware of the power embedded in my research role to tell the participants' stories. Individuals have asked whether I was "afraid" of a variety of experiences during this field study: going into the rainforest, living in an unfamiliar environment, potential conflict with others or between others, maintaining personal safety. Certain experiences generated discomfort: fishing in rough seas from a small boat, finding a large gecko on my kitchen wall, and, on a more personal note, telling a participant of her son's verbal abuse of a younger child are just a few. However, after years of experiences with a myriad of individuals in my social work career, I have come to trust my own intuitions among new people and circumstances, and I was able to do so during the field study as well. As disconcerting as some of them were, I did not feel afraid of those experiences. The thought that actually did cause me to be fearful emerged from the reality of my intrinsically-located power to tell the participants' stories: I was afraid that I might inadvertently misrepresent their stories. As a result, I did all I could to ensure that the participants' voices came through clearly. For example, I was transparent about the entire process and how their words would be used. I typed notes from our interviews, pored over them with the participants, and made any changes they requested without question; then returned to share the re-typed version with them,

sometimes involving several rounds of changes or additions. I talked with them about my initial analyses and asked for their reactions and contributions; I then returned to Tobago with the final version and shared it with them individually and in small groups. In the end, however, the final construction of the stories was mine. In considering such an unequal allotment of power, I believe that fears about misinterpreting or misrepresenting another's life story can serve as a necessary safeguard in a researcher's consciousness. And being intensely aware of one's own power is the first step toward being open to a *shift* in the power differential between researcher and participant.

Emerging from behind the Academic Mask: Sharing My Own Stories

Another way in which I relinquished the reins of power in this experience was through *not hiding behind the academic mask of a qualitative researcher.* First, just as the participants modeled for me the authentic sharing of their life experiences, I reciprocated by being genuine with them in sharing my own. For example, my being a white Western woman generated questions about my personal views and the conditions of my life. I told them of growing up in a small cotton mill town in the south and the experience of not realizing my family was poor because the entire community was poor; of what it has been like for me to live through segregation, the processes of change, and the things that have not changed; of being raised in a fundamentalist church, later choosing agnosticism, and then moving to other avenues of spirituality; of the inordinate number of deaths among my family and friends and my ongoing efforts to reconcile the losses; of my education and the reasons I made my career choices; and, of the kinds of relationships I have had with others. As we are trained in the earliest lessons of social work, I was prepared to "set boundaries" by not answering questions that might feel inappropriate. I was never asked a question by participants or villagers that I felt compelled not to answer, largely, I think, because of the degree of candor they modeled for me.

Finding Common Ground

A second essential element of removing the academic mask, for me, was being open to *identifying with* the participants' experiences based on my own life stories, and to check out the possible common spaces with them as well as the differences. Some say it is presumptuous, at best—and more often essentialist thinking—for a Western researcher in a postcolonial environment to even conceive that there may be similarities in experiences of researcher and participant, given their very different socio-political contexts. I did not find that to be true in this study in Tobago. To be certain, I never forgot that I had the freedom and resources to move about the island, to come into their lives and leave at my own choosing, while their circumstances prevented similar choices. I was deeply cognizant of the chasm of differences that can be generated by that power differential. Nevertheless, I found that when I was forthright with participants about my life, our conversations took off into sparkling paths of recognition, understandings, and sameness, as much so as of perplexity and differences. My childhood in a cotton mill community led to shared remembrances from both our lives: of being looked out for by an entire village rather than by a single caretaker or family; of that reality co-existing with a strong cultural taboo against asking others for help, even when there is no food in the house; and on to the trials of having everyone "know your business." My descriptions of the realities of segregation caused perplexity and further questioning by some participants who had never felt racial discrimination, yet sparked recognition in the minds of those who had. Of the latter, one individual said he had never known what it felt like to be hated because of his skin color until he went to America. Even though we viewed that reality from opposite locations on the power-oppression landscape, we were still able to share our mutual sorrow about it and our dreams for more acceptance and respect among people of different circumstances. In both these instances, and in hundreds of others, our conversations were enriched because each of us, researcher and participant, were willing to take the risk that

there might be some common essences, despite the vastly different contexts of our lives outside that space. Within such essences, I found that the reins of responsibility can be removed, and the power differential suspended.

Final Reflections

It is hoped that, through these glimpses into ways in which the women participants in Tobago invited me into their kitchens and porches, shared their children, friends, churches, gatherings, work, humor, thoughts and dreams with me, the reader will understand that the building of reciprocity was positioned primarily in their hands, not my own. It seems implausible now to have ever perceived the latter. In further reflections about the reciprocal process the women and other villagers initiated, I find myself re-visiting a feminist notion mentioned earlier in this narrative: that of the fluidity of power relations, involving reconstruction and renegotiation throughout the research process. The ways in which the women included me in their lives felt like that, fluid and graceful. I wonder what the experience might have been like had I not been willing—or not known how—to re-negotiate my own perceived role of responsibility for creating reciprocal relationships. What if I had only given and not received... or only received and not given? Even as these questions emerge, the answers begin to crystallize. These women modeled for me how to re-construct my role. It was an elegant modeling.

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