Women Making Freedom: Locating Gender in Intra-Caribbean Migration from a Curaçaoan Perspective

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Introduction

Historically, neoclassical economic theories have explained migration as a predominantly male endeavor, and the economics of labor migration has neglected women as independent participants and autonomous decision-makers in the migratory process (Cerrutti and Massey; Baldwin and Mortley). While men have been recognized as active decision-makers in migration, women who play the same role have been stigmatized, rendered invisible, or excluded (Huq). In the Caribbean, too, even though migration is deeply rooted in the region’s history, migration has been conceptualized as a largely male worker affair. The scholarly research on migration has long sidelined gender and made women nearly invisible. Historiography has sometimes subsumed women’s participation in migration under the category of family reunification and has paid very little attention to women’s autonomous migration. Yet, like men, women in the Caribbean have emigrated on their own and left their households behind to seek employment or fulfill other ambitions abroad.

Curaçao, an island of 444 square kilometers in the southern Caribbean, near the coast of Venezuela, fits in this general picture of the region. The historian W. E. Renkema, in his study on Curaçaoan migration in the nineteenth century, points to a correlation between drought and migration. He notes that the number of people leaving the country in search of work would increase dramatically after a year of drought. The scope of his study is limited to male migration. Although Curaçaoan women did not always migrate in numbers as large as men, they represented a proportion of the population that, by emigrating, stepped outside the boundaries set by the Curaçaoan society for their gender. As for scholarly attention, most studies about past emigration from Curaçao
have hinted at the presence of women but have not explored their role sufficiently as part of a gender-sensitive analysis of migration. Renkema’s study helps us to understand the circumstances that encouraged men to migrate but does not answer why Curacaóan women also migrated. In the last four decades, Caribbean studies have seen a significant shift toward a more gendered approach to research on past and present waves of migration (Green). Given this recent development in Caribbean social historiography, Curacao should not remain behind, should also employ a gender perspective, and should include women in studies of past (and present) intra- and extra-regional migration.

However, when one wants to understand gender-specific migration movements and in that sense also recover the experiences of women in migration, in particular working-class women, one must address issues related to the process of data collection. It is here that one can clearly see how colonialism, race, and class intersect with gender and sexuality. The patriarchal social structure of inequality that has historically relegated women to an inferior status in society and the consequent disadvantages has impacted women of all races and classes. Nevertheless, in the colonial Caribbean, some women were more affected than others, since women belonged both to the enslaved and slave-owner groups, to the oppressed and the oppressors, to the colonized and the colonizers. After the abolition of slavery, freed working-class women in particular continued to suffer oppression based upon gender, race, and class (Beckles; Shepherd; Scully and Paton). Curacao shares this history with the rest of the Caribbean: the wretchedness of slavery, the trials of postemancipation, and the continuing struggle against racist and patriarchal ideologies and forms of economic subjugation. Feminist scholarly historical research addresses these issues and concerns and recognizes power as a central factor in the lives of the research subjects. It takes into account that gender intersects with race, sexuality, and class, and it is also an important aspect of the differential power relations that determine what the dominant groups in societies want people to remember and forget. Consequently, what kinds of data are available to scholars of gender-specific migration is related to history and intersectionality.

**Connecting Archival and Oral History Data to Engender Migration Historiography: The Case of Curacao**

Applying a feminist approach in the present paper means looking at what past emigration has meant for Curacao working-class women in particular and asking what is missing in the authoritative records of historiography. Archives are a complex cite of influences and representations
and are in most cases fragmented and unfixed (Kadar and Buss 115). For a long while, archival documents have tended to represent the official colonial view or other dominant views, in most cases defined by “the metropolitan eye; the white, male gaze” (Brereton 3). There exists this coloniality in the production of information: colonial, racial, patriarchal, and other hegemonic forms of producing data erase certain events and experiences (Grosfoguel 220). Arturo Escobar has introduced the concept of “coloniality of knowledge,” which he defines as the state of knowledge production in a (post)colonial setting based on Eurocentric epistemologies that claim to be objective, scientific, neutral, universal, and truthful while replacing local modes of knowing and producing meaning.

Any writer of a critical analysis of archival data should keep in mind that alternative views have been “silenced” in the sense of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s Silencing the Past. Caribbean women were even more absent in historiography, and the Jamaican historian Lucille Mathurin Mair points out that therefore, researchers should revisit the archival records in order to open up “new emphases and new interpretations relating to the black Jamaican woman, and to decode the real world of enslaved and free women so as, eventually, to shift the parameters of traditional historiography” (234–35). The sociologist Latoya Lazarus adds another dimension to this in her article “Working with Marginalized” and ‘Hidden’ Populations: Researchers’ Anxieties and Strategies for Doing Less Harmful Research regarding the unsilencing of gender and women’s inclusion in historiography. She states that in a Caribbean context, a feminist approach entails, first, decentering white, heterosexual, high- and middle-class males in research as well as privileged, nonwhite, heterosexual, middle-class males. Archival texts, in a similar way as conventional literary texts, lend themselves properly to feminist modes of thinking by deconstructing and reclaiming existing patriarchal considerations (Kadar and Buss 115). Brereton underscores that such an approach of decoding, deconstructing, and reading against the grain will not only “put women into history” but will redefine and reconstruct gendered historical narratives as well (2).

I argue that in addition to this new gendered approach to archival documents, oral history—the so-called “bottom-up” approach—offers great potential for the reconstruction of history by giving voice to those whom historiography has rendered voiceless (Allen, “‘Nothing’”). Oral history has been defined as the testimonies and personal recollections of people who have experienced certain events firsthand or who were sufficiently close to these events to recollect them. Also, in the case of Curaçao, where orality has been a dominant form of communication by the Afro-Curaçaoan working-class population, oral history has often been
used for the collection of folklore material as well. These folkloric materials refer to stories, myths, songs, proverbs, and other information passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Eyewitness accounts sometimes become stories as they are transmitted orally from the older generations to the younger ones, beyond people’s lifetimes. As a research practice, oral history is also called biographical research because when narrators recall their personal past, they engage in a review of their life story. In addition to its emphasis on factual statements to provide historical data, oral history is also a vehicle of biographical memories, expressions of meaning, and representations of culture. Here, oral history is not primarily concerned with the accuracy of a person’s recollection but with the manner in which and the reasons why people remember what they do. Oral history can be instrumental in revealing, contesting, challenging, and reversing the aforementioned coloniality of knowledge, framed by class, race, and gender. It can be used to foreground the testimony of those normally excluded from hegemonic discourse production: those who might be spoken about, but not spoken with (Hoagland).

What makes oral history so interesting to researchers is that it produces data that can often lead to new interpretations of history.

By exploring women’s migration in a Dutch Caribbean context, this paper challenges the near erasure of the Dutch Caribbean from Caribbean scholarship, not only in migration studies but generally. Postcolonial Caribbean scholarship still displays a form of “coloniality of knowledge” whereby the colonial habit of dividing the region into language areas is maintained in much the same way as during colonial days. A “fragmented nationalism,” as the historian Franklin Knight (Caribbean) calls it, still holds firm in Caribbean studies, including migration studies, notwithstanding the fact that the people participating in intra-Caribbean migration transgress the traditional subregional barriers and weave a web of connectedness between people of different Caribbean societies.

The sources I have used for my research on gender and migration are a cross-section of different forms of archival materials, both present in Curacao as well in the countries where emigrations took place. Searching in foreign archives is not an easy task, as documents are not always accessible; however, digitalized documents obviously facilitate the search. In that way, I hope to avoid fragmented knowledge and one-sided views that usually come along when one uses only one type of document. For, according to Marlene Kadar and Helen Buss, archives, besides being a complex site of influence and representations, are also an incomplete as well as an unfixed and changing piece of knowledge that will grow as it is being built (Kadar and Buss 115). First of all, some of the archives of Curacao are located at the National Archive of the Netherlands in The
Hague. Also, there are the Curacao’s passenger record books: the passports of people leaving the country since 1863 that provide information such as name, year of birth, place of birth, profession, and destination. I have examined protocols of notarial and secretarial deeds that include contracts migrants entered into with their foreign employers regarding their work conditions and the benefits that they would receive. The colonial accounts (*koloniale verslagen*) of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries have offered some statistical insight into the number of people who emigrated during a given year. I have also consulted editions of *De Curacaosche Courant*, a weekly publication that between 1812 and 1870 was the only newspaper in circulation on the island. It was the semi-official herald of government, publishing official government announcements, while also containing international news (Langenfeld 59). In the local Roman Catholic newspapers in the Papiamento language, *La Cruz* and *La Union*, one could also find articles on migrations from Curacao, in which Roman Catholic priests warned against venturing to unknown destinations. They feared that they would lose control over the Curacaonian black working-class people when they migrated (Allen, *Di*).² For my research on the migration to Cuba, I have also consulted documents in the Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Las Tunas, Registro Civil de Manati, Registro Civil de Puerto Padre, and Archivo Histórico Provincial de Camagüey. Finally, oral history interviews as historical material helped to capture and unlock the expressions of subjective experience and historical imagination of working-class migrant women. By means of oral history, I was also able to “uncover” the near-invisible working-class Curacaonian women as they moved as intra-Caribbean migrants and “unsilenced” their voices in this regard. By analyzing both archival documents and oral history material for traces of counternarratives, one could explore working-class women’s participation in migration movements.

**Emigration from Curacao**

Before the abolition of slavery, which occurred in the Dutch Caribbean in 1863, manumitted, working-class black Curacaons, affected by the poor economic conditions of the island, would often opt to become migrant workers elsewhere in the region. An example is the migration to Berbice and Demerara (in modern-day Guyana) that lasted until 1838, after which the local government enacted legislation prohibiting foreigners from coming and recruiting laborers for work elsewhere. Documents show that not only men but also a few single mothers rented themselves out to employers in Berbice and Demerara. In some cases, such as with Cathalina
Isenia, Anna Margaritha, and Maria Girigoria, mothers took along their infants. Their contracts stated that they would be responsible for the care of their children but that the employer could advance them needed monies for this purpose (Langenfeld 94). It is unclear whether it was common practice for Curaçaoan mothers to take along their children when they emigrated; there are also cases of women leaving their children behind, as I will discuss later in this paper.

After abolition, because of the persistent deteriorating economic situation in Curaçao, men and, to a lesser extent, women continued to emigrate to countries that offered work opportunities. So, together with other Caribbean migrant laborers, Curaçaoans helped constitute the necessary labor supply for postplantation agricultural economies in the region. Curaçao followed the general Caribbean model of temporary, circular labor migration, with people moving back and forth depending on the availability of work in a given territory. The most popular migration destinations for Curaçaoans were Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Suriname (Van Soest 20; Koot 44, 54; Dekker 98; Pietersz; Allen, “Emigración” and Ta Cuba).

The reasons people chose to leave their country in search of work elsewhere were far more complex than what is usually assumed. People did not migrate at random; instead, when confronted with the opportunity of voluntary emigration, they would weigh their choices. Faced with the prospect of getting a job, or perhaps even earning a higher income as a migrant than in their country of origin, they based their migration choices on factors such as the proximity of the job location, the fluidity of the border in relation to their island of origin, and the personal costs of separation from their loved ones. This explains the emigration of many generations of Afro-Curaçaoans to Venezuela and Colombia, located near the island. Because of its proximity, Venezuela served during the time of slavery as a destination of emigration for people from Curaçao: the enslaved escaped primarily to the Coro region in northwest Venezuela.

However, emigration also occurred to Puerto Rico in the north, which cannot be explained by geographical nearness. Kathryn R. Dungy explains that ships from Curaçao often had to tack against strong trade winds to reach Puerto Rico, which made the voyage a long and tedious event (93). This means that there were other factors that determined the decision to leave. Beside the expectation of earning a higher wage, kinship proved to be another decisive factor in emigration. One example from the nineteenth century may help to elucidate this. In 1862, two months after she gained freedom, a young Curaçaoan woman named Maria requested permission from the colonial authorities to leave Curaçao for Puerto Rico.
She wished to go there with her two sons to join other members of her family who were already working in the Spanish colony (Nationaal). It should also be mentioned that before abolition, in times of economic hardship, Curacaonian slave-owners would often sell their enslaved workers to buyers in Puerto Rico, such as Pablo Bettini from Ponce and Buenaventura Quiñones (Langenfeld 89). This case of the recently manumitted Maria wanting to join her relatives in Puerto Rico shows that family reunification was an important motive for emigration and that manumission from slavery enabled some people to reestablish kinship ties across the islands of the Caribbean. Also, freed working-class people, both men and women, left for Puerto Rico.

Studies conducted in Puerto Rico provide additional details about who these Curacaonian migrant women were and what they did for a living. In *Women and Urban Change in San Juan Puerto Rico, 1820–1868*, Félix V. Matos Rodríguez uses listings of foreigners residing in the capital, San Juan, and mentions some Curacaonian women (called females of color) who lived there and held professions such as street vendor, dulcera (maker of sweet candy), seamstress, laundress, and hat maker. Some of them had arrived as enslaved people; it is not clear whether all of them did. Dungy cites the 1830 register of Aguadilla and the neighboring town of Aguada that also identifies colored female Curacaonian immigrants in Puerto Rico. Aguadilla was a new town, founded in the late 1770s, where many free people of color as well as immigrant free people of color lived (Dungy 92). For example, the thirty-three-year-old Vuelemina [or Wilhelmina] Ferrer had arrived from Curacao in 1830 with her three young children. This register also shows that some colored female migrants from Curacao ran their own businesses in Puerto Rico. Such was the case of Catalina Ricardo, who, along with her daughter, Constanza Henrique, owned a small grocery store and a small inn (Dungy 95). It shows that these women changed from serving people to becoming more autonomous.

Curacaonian women in the role of small merchants could also be found in the then-Danish island of St. Thomas, another popular destination for Curacaonian emigrants. Both elites and nonelites emigrated to St. Thomas in the third decade of the nineteenth century. According to Els Langenfeld (89), some Jewish merchants from Curacao moved to St. Thomas and took along their enslaved. Neville Hall states that a large portion of St. Thomas’s freed population was of foreign origin; among them were people from Curacao but also from another Dutch island: St. Eustatius (180–81). In his master’s thesis, *Een vergeten parel in de Deense Kroon (A Forgotten Pearl in the Danish Crown)*, Tim Deahl emphasizes that more freed women from Curacao than men emigrated to St. Thomas.
Deahl quotes a report by Von Walterstorff, who maintains that women outnumbered men in the migration from Curaçao to St. Thomas: 108 women versus forty-six men (66). According to Deahl, the reason was that in the Dutch colonies, more women than men received their freedom (66).

Most of these women were engaged in commerce. They would buy goods in Puerto Rico and sell them in St. Thomas. This behavior was condemned by the white elite in St. Thomas, who complained that these women imported worthless goods from Puerto Rico and sold them at a higher price. In practice, however, it proved difficult to get these merchants off the island. The detailed description of these women is striking. The historian Julia Clancy Smith concludes that, indeed, women traveling without men or kin guardians were often ignored in historical data except when they were accused of illegal activities such as smuggling, theft, or prostitution (38). Reading the archival texts about these women carefully and against the grain points to how this group was ideologically stereotyped by the dominant class of St. Thomas and how these Curaçaoan women made use of their acquired freedom to improve their social position and status while transcending colonial geographical frontiers as well as racial, class, and gender stereotypes.

**In Their Own Words**

The migration of Curaçaoans to Cuba in the early-twentieth century was the last massive migration of Curaçaoans in the immediate postemancipation era. Alejandro Paula described this migration as an overwhelmingly male working-class event in *Problemen Rondom de Emigratie van Arbeiders uit de Kolonie Curaçao naar Cuba 1917–1937* (Problems around the Emigration of Workers from the Colony of Curaçao to Cuba 1917–1937). This book was based on the vast amount of existing written archival documents, and Paula identified the problems the male workers faced in Cuba as they were reported to the local colonial government.

In the case of my own work in the 1980s on this particular migration from Curaçao to Cuba, I was just in time to find a few elderly returnees from Cuba still alive in Curaçao as well as some others or their families who had remained permanently in Cuba. In my project, alongside archival research in Curaçao and in Cuba, I was able to include their voices as counternarratives to the written documents. Names of these informants could be obtained by appealing to homes for the elderly, daycare centers for senior citizens, and people who dealt with senior citizens on a daily basis, as well as by asking these sources whether they knew other people who had also gone to Cuba and were still alive. Through this snowball
effect I was able to identify a fair number of informants, including women who had migrated from and returned to Curacao and children whose migrant mothers had left them behind in the care of a grandmother and never returned to Curacao. Archival documents do not mention female emigration to Cuba, and the statistics about these women are not accurate. Through oral history, I have been able to acquire additional information concerning women’s participation in this migration through the voices of migrant women themselves and to compare their experiences with those of the men.

Most of the male Curacaonans were drawn to Cuba by stories of earning a lot of money. Stories that “even the lizards there rustled around with dollars” influenced many to leave for Cuba. This labor-migration movement from Curacao to Cuba commenced in 1917 and reached its peak in 1919. There is official data stating that in 1919, at least 1,900 men went to work as cane cutters for the colonias owned by the American Chaparra and Manati sugar companies in the eastern part of Cuba. A large part of Cuba’s sugar production was financed by US capital, which at that time controlled an important part of the Cuban economy. The men worked in the vicinity of factories situated in Delicias, Chaparra, and Manati, and many of them settled in the port of Cayo Juan Claro, the city of Puerto Padre, and the town of Vazquez in the province of Las Tunas. There they met other migrants from Haiti, Jamaica, and the smaller English-speaking countries. Never before had men emigrated from Curacao in such large numbers, even when economic conditions had not been favorable on the Dutch island. Although it is not clear how many male migrants from Curacao left for Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is likely that about fifty percent of men in their prime working years emigrated to work in the Cuban cane fields (Allen, “Emigración” and Ta Cuba). This massive move consisting predominantly of men had an impact on Curacaonian society, in particular the women who were left behind to survive on the bare minimum. Documents and oral history both support this assessment. The departure of so many men resulted in a double workload for the women who stayed behind. Many women went to seek help from the government to ascertain the whereabouts of their husbands, sons, or other family members (Allen, “Curacaonan”). In addition to experiencing this migration as a relative, wife, or partner of a male migrant, women also took part. However, they remained in the shadow of the men and were not present in the official statistics of the time. In interviews with Curacaonian returnees such as Andres (Didi) Sluis, Raymundo Emelina, and Angel Martina, the names of women were also provided, and I was able to interview some of these female migrants.
Women migrated to Cuba in response to gender-specific employment in the service of Curacaoan elite families who bought land in Cuba in the beginning of the twentieth century. Some of them went to work either as nannies or cooks for these Curacaoan families. One of them, whose pseudonym is Petra in this paper, told the following story of her migration experience. Petra left Curacao for Cuba around 1913, while she was in her early twenties, to work for a family, leaving her only child with her mother. Her principal motive for going to Cuba was the poor socio-economic conditions on Curacao. As she recounted, in Cuba she earned US$40 a month as a nanny, compared to the five Antillean guilders (approximately US$2.80) she could earn in Curacao as a domestic servant, plus the one guilder per straw hat she could earn making hats. Petra stated, “You went through a lot of trouble to get just one guilder per hat.” By immigrating, Petra provided a steady income for her family. Every month she sent some of the money she earned to her mother to take care of her daughter, and she also sent gifts, such as dresses, for her daughter. She remembered that when it was her daughter Merelda’s birthday, she asked a Cuban seamstress to sew clothes for her to send to Curacao (Allen, “Curacaoan” 68–69).4

Compared to male emigrants, who upon leaving knew only that they were going to Cuba to cut cane, Petra knew the family for whom she was going to work before she left; in fact, she herself had requested to work for this family in Cuba. Petra’s story gives us a clear impression of a nanny’s life and her life as an immigrant. She shared with the employing family the daily stress of family life in a foreign country and functioned as a form of psychological release for the family, who, being migrants themselves, had to cope with an unfamiliar sociocultural setting. For example, she would help them to overcome a common fear of Cuba in that time of white children being abducted. She was someone they could trust and to whom they could turn with certain problems. In an evocative way, she described her presence in their lives by saying, “when you are a nanny, you are involved in everything [Ora bo ta yaya, bo ta den tur kos].” Even though in an unequal power relationship based on her skin color and class position, she presented herself as a worthy woman who contested existing religious, class, racial, and ethnic divisions.

Another female interviewee who had gone to Cuba as a cook for a Jewish family, some of whose members lived in Curacao and whom she already knew, recounted a similar story to me.5 The family branch in Cuba wanted to change their former cook, who had also come from Curacao but who had grown old. The Jewish family she had gone to work with had asked her to join them so that they would have someone they could trust to prepare their food in a Kosher manner. She was also
handpicked for security purposes, based on foreign rich families’ fear of being poisoned by Cuban cooks. Juanita left for Cuba in 1924 and stayed there with the family for about ten years. By migrating, she was able to earn a better salary and to help out the rest of her family at home. Her story tells us what it meant to be a cook at that time and to be one in a foreign country. She recounted how she had to take into account religious food prescriptions as well as food customs based on products that were not always to be found there. Consequently, she remembered the moments she would cook local Curaçaoan food such as kòmkòmber chiki stobá (cucumber stew) and kalbas largu stobá (green calabash stew), much to the enjoyment of the family. In the course of time, she also learned to cook Cuban food, such as the popular tostones. Both Juanita’s and Petra’s stories focused on the economic gain of migration. However, both lived in a familial context and stressed the fact that they were important in the lives of the principally Jewish Curaçaoan female family members and their children living in the exterior. In that way, their histories added a different perspective than those of the men.

Interviewees also stated that some men, after they had been to Cuba and seen the situation, returned to Curaçao and then took their legal or common-law wife and children back to Cuba. This was also confirmed by articles in the local newspaper, La Cruz, which provided some data of women leaving the island together with their partner and children (6 March 1918, 11 June 1919, 18 June 1919). These women would sometimes work as washer women (lavar por la calle) or cook for pay in Cuba.

During the exodus between 1917 and 1921, when about fifty percent of the Curaçaoan male labor force left Curaçao temporarily to work in the cane fields in Cuba, single mothers went to Cuba, not knowing their employer ahead of time the way the abovementioned Petra and Juanita had. They were also drawn, just like the men, by stories about a riu di oro (river of gold) in Cuba. I have not been able to interview this category of women about their journey, their motives for leaving home, and their travel as single women. Some of these women left their children with their mothers, went to Cuba, and never came back to Curaçao; I was able to interview some of these children in the 1980s and 1990s and found that they still remembered this traumatic episode in their lives of longing for their mother’s love but never being able to experience it. Their stories can also be considered what Deborah Britzman calls “difficult knowledge,” that causes pain to both those who have experienced it, as well as to the one who is doing the research about it (qtd. in Kadar and Warley 6).

This migratory pattern seems also to have occurred at other times in Curaçao’s history; one indication is a local song in which children say that they want to go and see their moms. This traditional song, which
expressed a traumatic experience of abandonment, used to be sung by fishermen in the village called Boka Samí when they pulled their boats onto land in the early- and mid-twentieth century (Allen, “Curaçaoan” 70; Zikinzá). A fisherman, who was seventy years old in 1991 when I interviewed him, recalled that as a child, he had heard of a woman named Virginia from his village, Boka Samí, who had gone to the Dominican Republic, where she sold peanut candy in the port. There are two versions of the song. The following version refers to migration to the Dominican Republic, also a popular country of emigration for Curaçaoans:

_Awa na awa bati mayó_  
Mi t’ei bai Santo Domingo, bai mira mama. Si mi pagai kibra na kaminda.  
Si mi pagai kibra na kaminda, lo mi rema ku mi man. _Awa na awa bati mayó_

_Awa na awa bati mayó_ [untranslatable]  
I am going to Santo Domingo to see mother If my oars break on the way.  
If my oars break on the way, I will row with my hands  
_Awa na awa bati mayó_ [untranslatable]. (Allen, “Curaçaoan” 70)

**Some Concluding Remarks**

Emigration is one of the ways in which working-class Curaçaoans have tried to deal with economic challenges on the island. As both men and women participated in emigration, researching migration lends itself very well to gender analysis. Women have shown a pattern of migration that differs from that of men: there were usually fewer women migrants (although migration to St. Thomas appears to have been an exception in this regard); women often migrated alone (whereas men usually traveled in groups); and women performed other types of work in the country of destination.

To participate in the discipline of migration studies requires any scholar to pay attention to the selection and collection of different types of data. First, a combination of documents in the country of origin and in the country of destination is necessary. This necessitates creative ways of managing documents that transcend the geographical and linguistic borders originally set by the colonial powers, as well as scholarly cooperation across those boundaries to counteract the “coloniality of knowledge” still alive in Caribbean societies today. Modern technologies (such as making research data accessible online) can play a facilitating role in this regard. Second, transcending the traditional male gaze and looking at the female experiences also requires expanding the idea of information archive to one that is intersectional. Understanding gender in migration studies in particular must take into account the interconnectedness of gender
with social class, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and race in knowledge production in order to get traces and fragments to understand the social reality of those neglected in historical writings.

The utilization of oral history helps to better illustrate the complex and varied ways in which marginalized, excluded, silenced, and hidden people understand and interpret their own lives in relationships of unequal power by negotiating and contesting social categories of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Their intimate and personal stories help us to understand their daily life experiences within existing social, political, and economic conditions and the role migration plays in this process. It is precisely the expressive dialogue between document archives and oral history that produces the richness of human experience.

University of Curacão

Notes

1. Curacao is situated in the southern Caribbean, between Aruba and Bonaire, north of Venezuela. Curacao was one of the islands comprising the former Dutch Caribbean federation called the Netherlands Antilles (1954–2010). In 2010, this federation fell apart and Curacao became an internally self-governing entity or “country” with direct ties to the Netherlands.

2. The Roman Catholic mission, in this case the Fathers of the Dominican Order, published various weekly newspapers from 1870.

3. The catalog compiled by Dra. Estela Cifre de Loubriel, *Catálogo de extranjeros residentes en Puerto Rico en el siglo XIX*, shows that of the 158 immigrants from Curacao living in Puerto Rico at that time, thirty-six were women.

4. The interviewee was born in 1885, and I interviewed her on 14 May 1986.

5. Author interview in 1995 with Juanita Ilario-Tromp, who was born in Aruba (Dutch Caribbean) on 23 June 1909 and who came to Curacao when she was nineteen years old.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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