

I Grew Up in Rural Jamaica. I Witnessed Abject Poverty

The Personal Is Always Political: Situating Myself in Labour and Development Research

By [Tina Renier](#)

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"Just as surely history is the product of those forces which seek to dominate in the name of glory or profit, equally is history the product of the forces of those who rebel" – Michael Manley, 1978

As a critical social science scholar, I reject the positivist view that reality is objective and in order for knowledge to be considered legitimate, it must be substantiated only through statistical data and citing "authorities". I acknowledge that I have biases. My ontological and epistemological standpoint is primarily shaped by my personal experiences – whether through interactions with others, observations, listening for diverse views, reading extensively and being in a position of vulnerability.

I grew up in rural Jamaica and was raised by my grandparents. My mother was a college drop out and I have never met my father. In the small community of Barbary Hill, I witnessed and experienced abject poverty, deplorable roads, limited access to water, no scope for stable and quality forms of employment, teenage pregnancy, gang violence and hovering above all of these deficiencies is people's quest to survive in a socially and economically depressed environment.

Majority of the household heads including mine are women. Their faces are punctuated by severe hardships but they never expressed complaint as they found various means to make a living and to take care of their families. Even when the bodies of the women were tired, they were forced to carry the burden of their cross and the cross of others because this is a "natural" expectation of them. The ability to balance multiple roles up to the point of extreme exhaustion.

As a young woman and a researcher, my life is punctuated by navigating multiple sources of exploitation through resistance in what I call a "Babylon" (capitalist) system. I was told that no one in Jamaica from my community would ever be selected for any grand opportunity because Jamaica is Kingston, the capital. I resisted. I went ahead at the age of ten and I won my first public speaking competition. I remember when a teacher told a group of students in my grade nine class in high school that no matter what authority does, authority will always be right and will never stand punishment. I resisted.

I ran for the Student's Council and I helped to make students more aware of their rights and I fought to end the grade streaming system. I remember when I had almost quarter million in debts to pay for both tuition and rent in my undergraduate years in Jamaica and I was working in a low paying job. I resisted. I left the job. I was punished by not receiving my

outstanding compensation but I left with dignity because I realize the true value of my labour. I will never be compensated by a group of people who are only interested in profit making. Recently, I have decided to re-define feminine beauty on my own terms in which I decided to cut my hair extremely low. My hair sends a political message that I am in the process unlearning to learn another side of a story that I am willing to discover. It also suggests that I am a rebel that is re-born – radical and strategic in my challenge to the status quo.

Thus, before education can be used as tool for social transformation and before a researcher can create an alternative discourse and representations of people on the margins, the researcher must first establish her personal philosophy. When I say that my personal is always political, I mean that it is a political choice to use my personal experiences as a set of philosophies to guide the way in which I speak, write, engage and my deliberate use of data collection methods that are not imposed from the top-down. When I say that my personal is always political, I mean that I am able to acknowledge situations in which I possess power and privilege but I am also cognizant of the fact that I become one with the subjects (women workers) who I wish to study because of a common nationality, gender, race and social class.

It is no longer 'I' but 'we'. When I say that my personal is always political, I mean that I have become more aware that it is not necessarily my boss that is my enemy but a rather a broader system that thrives on extraction of ideas and labour. When I say that my personal is always political, I mean that I have become more aware that while I am situated in a country that has a long contentious history of violent encounters and subjugation of marginalized peoples, my decision and the decision of women to resist is also a part of that history that is usually omitted. This is because the political agenda is one that is white, hegemonic and patriarchal.

My first experience with workers was when I had worked as a research assistant in Jamaica. Island wide focus group discussions according to clusters and electronic questionnaires were conducted in order to investigate perceptions and attitudes towards work and management in Jamaica's public and private sectors. To organize the focus group discussions according to clusters was an extremely challenging task because many names on the list were no longer working in a specific department, they have transferred to another cluster, have retired or have died. When I did daily calls, many workers expressed skepticism in their tone because they thought that if they shared information about their feelings towards management, they would risk losing their jobs. Others were excited to be selected for participation and they are others who flatly rejected the idea even though there is a confidentiality and informed consent paper to be signed prior to the focus group discussion.

My most memorable experience was the first focus group discussion among workers in a well renowned public sector company in Jamaica. As the note taker, I observed the way in which the workers had entered the hotel room. The pace of their walk was extremely slow almost as if they were walking on hot bricks. This suggests anxiety and distrust towards the new environment. While they expressed warm greetings, they never displayed sharp eye contact with the facilitator or me in the beginning. I realized that they were taking time to be settled mentally and to decipher who we are and if we could be trusted before they demonstrated a full sense of comfort, support and trust. Within the introductory remarks, the participants were reminded about the confidentiality protocol and that us, as researcher

will protect their identity and that this is a safe space for sharing their thoughts and feelings about work and management. The faces of the workers immediately became more radiant with smiles and deep gasps of relief. One lady in particular, began to clap her hand in approval by responding, “Well, I am ready and I can’t wait to share!”. The focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview style of questions.

The first question, in my opinion, was the most potent of all questions. This is not only because it sets the context for the meta-perspective on the attitudes and perceptions of workers towards work and management but because the responses helped me to connect more with the experiences of the worker. Each participant was assigned the name of a fruit for confidentiality purposes and they were asked, “what images come to your mind when you think of your workplace?”

An outspoken participant whose fruit name was Star Apple said:

“The image that comes to my mind when I think about my work place is a burial ground because as a young person, you come in with so many high aspirations, bright ideas and good potential but management buries that. Management is concerned about how well you can follow what they want you do and not what you can add”.

Another worker whose fruit name is Pineapple added,

“Yes, that is so true. I see the work place as a plantation. You work extremely hard with little or no compensation. You will go above and beyond to do what you need to and management treats you like shit. I remember when we were short of staff one week and we had to adjust by taking on extra duties. I lift heavy weight materials and worked over time. I did not receive additional compensation. One day, it was raining and I called the office for an umbrella and no one answered the phone. No umbrella. No lunch and no extra compensation and when I fell ill, all my supervisor did was shout loudly at me to work harder”.

The first two responses left an indelible mark in my mind and in fact, I was able to connect these practical issues to conceptual issues because at the time, I was doing a free elective course in Management Studies called Organizational Behaviour at the University of the West Indies, Mona. I was introduced to the first and only case study on Jamaican workers’ attitudes of de-motivation in the labour force. It is called ‘Why Workers Wont Work’ by Kenneth Carter. Carter (1997) debated that the Jamaican workplace is similar to the plantation model in which there was a rigid three tiered bureaucratic structure. Workers are de-motivated and dissatisfied because management are like slave drivers.

They always expect more productivity and profit without any serious interest in motivating, coaching and helping to upgrade the skills, talents and knowledge of workers. Workers express their dissatisfaction by regular absenteeism to slow down productivity or they express these feelings in other covert ways. Hence, it is no surprise that the images that came to the mind of the participants in this research were the “burial ground and the plantation”. This knowledge was not used in the particular research project for the company. However, for current purposes, I have decided to incorporate historical knowledge on workers in order to connect the consistent patterns of the past to issues in contemporary development such as export processing zones in Jamaica. The bodies of women were sites

of violence, subjugation, exploitation and colonial oppression and today they are sites of new forms of imperial encounters but also resistance (Belen and Bose, 1990). This is one of the major postulations that will be made in my thesis to argue the ways in which women workers resist exploitation and to delve deeper into the methods and the reasons the methods were chosen. Although there are many scholars who have done academic work on the colonial division of labour and its connection to the new international division of labour and global division of labour, I think my work will have a meaningful and novel impact because of how I am able to weave context-specific experiences into the complex, conceptual issues of the main idea.

Earlier this year, I wrote in my thesis proposal that the researcher should develop a close connection with her participants and I was asked to expound. This is exactly what I mean. It means more than internalizing and interpreting what was said, how it was said and who said it. It means that my identity became that of a worker (Hernandez-Kelly, 1983).

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Tina Renier is currently pursuing a Masters in International Development at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada. Her area of specialization is labour and development.

Sources

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