Celebrating ourselves: the family reunion rituals of African-Caribbean transnational families

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Abstract  In the past decade, family reunions have become an important ritualized event among Afro-Caribbean transnational migrants. Dispersed across a large number of North Atlantic countries, Afro-Caribbeans have turned to organizing events specifically designed to reunite kinfolk. The rituals constitute a celebration of family as a distinct social group with a kin-based, lineage-like identity. Re-creating kin ties among those spread across different nations and transmitting kin-based connections to their offspring are the main incentives for holding these rituals. In this article I describe three different recent family reunions, one held in Barbados, one in Grenada, and one in Trinidad and Barbados. I analyse the specific forms these rituals take, relate their differences from the social positioning of the core members of the kin groups and discuss the signifying practices of the reunions for maintaining Caribbean family connections in the diaspora. Finally, I raise questions about how the kin-based identities constructed in the reunion rituals intersect with race/class, ethnic and national identities.

‘knowing your family is knowing yourself – bottom line!’

(Interview TM-5898)

It was in the early 1990s that I first began to hear my New York African-Caribbean friends talk about their going to family reunions ‘back home’ in the Caribbean. Their excitement about attending these events and the enthusiastic reports they brought back piqued my interest. They carefully distinguished these events from the usual visits to the Caribbean to ‘see family’, attend a funeral, participate in Carnival, Crop-Over, or Emancipation Day festivities, making it clear that these ‘family reunions’ were rituals specifically focused on a publicly enacted performance centring on family. Undertaken to reunite kinfolk who were widely dispersed through migrations across several national boundaries, these rituals represented a way that members of transnational families sought to re-engage in face-to-face interaction that would keep alive both family ties and memories of family, to reinstantiate and celebrate their concept of family.

In recent years, rituals have become an important site for anthropologists to examine how social facts and collective identities are made and remade (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993), how social practices and events are invested with meaning, and
how unwritten social memory is constructed, performed, and transmitted (Connerton 1989). With this in mind, I decided in 1998 to interview some of the individuals I knew who had recently participated in family reunions. My approach was to view their rituals as ‘signifying practices’, namely as expressive performances that call public attention to customs and values and create a consciousness of valued behaviour and beliefs, even when these are disputed (see Parkin 1992). Hence, I wanted to know what participating in these rituals meant. What light did they cast on the meaning of family to them? I wondered about the generational depth and the range of kin that would be represented. What kin-based activities preceded these events and eventuated from them? Why had the family reunion fervour emerged at this particular point in time? What kinds of subjectivities and identities did the events evoke in the participants? Finally, what role did memory, history and the past play in these ritualized gatherings and with what possible effect on the future?

This article then is about the family reunion rituals African Caribbeans organized in the 1990s, reunions specifically designed to reunite them in their ‘homelands’ with their kinfolk dispersed among many countries. The continued involvement of those who migrated abroad with their kin who remained behind was something I initially noted in my field research in a sugar plantation village in Barbados in the late 1950s. In the early 1970s I began, with my students and colleagues, to track the increase in the bidirectional exchanges occurring between kin abroad and those ‘back home’. By the 1980s we were able to document the fact that transnational family networks constituted one of the major channels of transmission for important exchanges – economic, political and cultural. Summarizing this research about transnational family networks, Basch et al. (1994: 79) wrote:

The family is the matrix from which a complexly layered transnational social life is constructed and elaborated. [It] facilitates the survival of its members, their class formation and mobility; and as the repository of cultural practices and ideology shaped in the home society, it mediates identity formation in the new setting as it socializes its members into a transnational way of life.

But what had not been noted in the literature of the time was the emergence during the late 1980s and 1990s of family reunion rituals among transnational families. Hence, a close look at these reunion rituals would supplement what we already knew about the meaning of family to African-Caribbean transmigrants. By transmigrants I mean immigrants who maintain multiple social, political, economic and cultural connections across national borders and with their home/ancestral countries.¹

So what do these family reunion rituals, initiated by the migrants, not by those ‘back home’, tell us? I collected in-depth information about the rituals from eight participants who belonged to three different descent groups that had held family reunions in Barbados, Grenada, and Trinidad/Barbados between 1993 and 1998. These individuals were either adult immigrants or the offspring of immigrants. The account of each of the reunion rituals is filtered through the views and perspectives of the individuals interviewed. The three case studies are not ‘definitive’ accounts of what happened in each reunion, nor do they necessarily reflect the different meanings
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The dispersed transmigrants who attended the reunion rituals came from places reflecting differing migration trajectories: the USA, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Ghana, Guyana and various places in the Caribbean. The size of the reunions varied from a total of 46 participants to an estimated 250 participants. In all but one of the reunions, participants who came from overseas outnumbered the participants who lived on the island where the event was held. The reunions of the three descent groups differed not only in scale but also in the scope of activities undertaken, and in the degree of formality in the arrangements and in what was regarded as the main intent of the reunion. These differences reflected the differing class status of the core kin groups who organized the reunion rituals: working-class, middle-class and elite. However, the rituals all shared a number of common features. A core sibling group and its paternally and/or maternally linked cousins initiated them all and as many as four generations were represented at all the reunions. They were inclusive in their definition of the kin who were invited and came: half-siblings, ‘outside’ children, spouses of legal and non-legal unions and their descendants were all present, and this included occasional individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, the concept of family embraced in the reunions was highly elastic and egalitarian; it overrode the status differences among kinfolk that influence their everyday social interactions. Non-kin friends on the islands who were ‘like family to us’ participated in some of the family reunion activities, underlining the inclusive nature of the concept of family being celebrated. There were other features in common too. An elderly male or female kin or a recently deceased kin was often said to be the reason for having the reunion at the time and place where it was held. This practice is related to the importance placed on showing respect to one’s elders and receiving their blessing in return. At all the family reunions the members of the group visited an ancestor’s home or grave. All the reunions were preceded by mini family reunions at which the idea of bringing everyone together was put forth. Following the reunions, there was more frequent visiting with kin living in different Western countries, with kin whom one ‘came to know’ at the reunions. Children were more frequently sent across national boundaries to visit their cousins. Finally, adults stressed the importance of bringing all the children together so that they ‘get to know their family’. This was one of the main rationales for holding the family reunion.

The significance of the rituals was captured in frequent iterations of ‘we are a very tight-knit family, a very close one’, ‘family is everything’, or ‘knowing your family is knowing yourself’. These statements were made to explain why family reunions were important. ‘Knowing your family’ referred not only to learning who you are but whom you can count on for support – a support that materializes in exchanges of goods, advice, services, ‘favours’, monetary assistance and the welcoming of kin who may wish to stay with you for shorter or longer periods. And, as I learned, a great deal of time, effort and money goes into the rituals that focus on creating this knowledge, the knowledge that ‘family’ is your most basic (collective) identity.

I turn now to a discussion of the reunions of three family groups whom I shall call: the Marshalls, the Bishops and the Williams.
The Marshalls

Over the Christmas–New Year holiday of 1997–98 the Marshalls organized their first formal family reunion in Barbados. They were siblings and cousins who had grown up in a sugar plantation village in the middle of Barbados, the island where I had carried out my early doctoral research and remained in touch with many of the people over the years. The brothers and sisters of the core Marshall group were now living in England, Canada and the USA and had children who were in college or about to go to college, as well as brothers and sisters who had remained in Barbados. A few years before this reunion was organized some of the family from elsewhere had met in Barbados for the funeral of their father, at which time they decided they wanted to gather together again as a family to maintain face-to-face contact: 47 people were part of their reunion ritual. Smaller in scale and scope than the other family reunions I discuss, there was also greater informality in the activities in which participants engaged. While Christmas and New Year’s dinners brought together the entire kin group to enjoy good Bajan food, other joint activities involved smaller segments who visited the deceased father’s home (now occupied by one of the brothers), the cemetery where he was buried, the village where the core kin group grew up. The rest of the time was spent relaxing and ‘liming’ (‘hanging out’ together), taking trips around the island, taking sea baths in the Caribbean Sea and going to clubs together. The men, often with the women joining them, engaged in their favourite pastime of sitting around drinking, talking and arguing about world and local events. There was considerable exchanging of personal memories and ‘catching up’ on what and how everybody was doing. Youngsters exchanged email addresses to ensure continued, rapid communication. The memorabilia of this reunion were limited to photographs and videos.

The several members of this family reunion to whom I spoke said the event was important and should be repeated. The adults emphasized the desire to reconnect with kin on a face-to-face basis and to refurbish their more distantly known kin connections. Of equal importance, they wanted to ensure that their children (born elsewhere) ‘get to know their family and their parents’ Bajan culture’. The Marshalls regard their family culture as superior to that of the different societies in which they now reside. They believe that if their children learn the family values of their homeland culture, they will be better able to confront the dangers one faces living in northern metropoles.4

Thus, for members of this group their family reunion had the twin purpose of recreating a kin-based collective identity and transmitting it to the younger generation. Did this happen? I can partly answer this for Andrea who was born and grew up in New York City. She is my godchild, was 20 years old at the time of the interview, and is the daughter of a black Barbadian father who was a member of the core kin group organizing the reunion, and a mother who is a white American professional. The long interviews I had with her touched mainly on issues of identity in relation to her biological family, her extended kin group and with respect to race, place and nation. Andrea had been to Barbados a few years earlier on the occasion of her paternal grandfather’s funeral and also when she was very young. However, now that she was older, she claimed this family reunion ritual altered her perceptions of her parents and her conflicts about her own racial identity in the USA:

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I’ve always had issues about who I am and what that means relative to my father’s culture and race and my mother’s background. … I needed to know my ancestry … and getting to know the island put my father into a context that I’d never been able to imagine … [it helped me understand] why there are conflicts [between us] and that there is richness to our relationship [that I did not recognize before]. I didn’t understand it until I went [to the reunion], was on that island [and watched him with all the people there]. It was so powerful. It really changed my perspective of him. … I also watched my mother for the first time being more comfortable around people than I had ever seen her before; and it was so nice. It made me feel more at ease also to just watch her walk around and say hello to these people who weren’t close family [but] who were family [and] totally incorporated her.

Andrea is impressed by and strongly attracted to the incorporative bonding that occurs during family reunions. She struck up a relationship with a distant cousin and a particularly close and warm relationship with her half-sister, Shawn, who was her father’s ‘outside child’ and was attending the University of the West Indies in Barbados:

You know I didn’t know how to address him [their father] to Shawn [her half-sister]; I didn’t know whether to say ‘our father’ or ‘my’ father. … It surprised me how much I looked up to Shawn, how smart I thought she was, and how I wanted to be so much like her … she had this regalness to her. … She totally was like … this is who I am and you can come into it. And I felt so honoured to be part of her.

Andrea explores the many meanings of the phrase ‘we family’, which people in her father’s village say to her when she meets them. She also notes that this concept may be metaphorically extended to encompass a broad range of people who, because they ‘grew up together … must be family!’

The evolution of Andrea’s discourse expresses her strong feelings about ‘belonging to family’ and its importance as a newly acquired identity. Her comments also revealed a number of interesting identity conflations. Early in the interview she speaks of feeling like a tourist as she walks around the village where her father grew up. She follows this by saying that she began to realize that the village was ‘in some sense an extension of the family’. This is her initial equation of family identity with place identity. The slippage occurs again later in the interview when she speaks about her pleasure in realizing she ‘had this family in this place’ and follows this comment with a comment about how comforting it is that she has now found ‘a place in the world I can go home to’. Reflecting on this, she muses ‘and here’s Andrea who thought she never really had family … but then she goes back [to Barbados] and finds she’s got a whole country’!

As Andrea deepens and enlarges her embrace of a family identity, she also expands her concept of the place identity of home to encompass the entire island. But what does this family-like island identity mean to her? Paralleling family/island
Conflations is her slippage between kin history and island history as she states her desire to learn more about the history of her kin connections and, later in the interview, about Barbadian history, politics and linguistic practices. Her comments point to the ways kin and nation identities are linked by tropes that draw on notions of a common ancestry. However, in this case it was not the nation-state appropriating family-like tropes but rather of Andrea extending her concept of family and place to include nation. And, as the interview draws to an end, her comments trump her kin/home/nation images of identity:

You know, I do look to the future and think I’d love to have these family reunions and be an organizer of one of them when I am older. I want to go down to Barbados and see family. I want to be involved with my family. I want to have that kind of relationship even though they’re spread all over the world. I want to have that sense of coming together. I want to have that sense of coming together … because I didn’t grow up with it.

One could ask whether ‘that sense of coming together’ Andrea experiences in the family reunion provides her with the grounding for another identity – that of belonging through one’s transnational kin ties to the brothers and sisters of an African Caribbean or an African diaspora? Here again the slippage from family-specific identities to ethnic, national and diasporic identities is facilitated by images of a common descent. But the question of a diasporic identity, which also hovers in the background of the larger and more formal reunion rituals held in Grenada, Trinidad and Barbados, cannot be answered directly with the interview material at hand. Possessing a diasporic identity requires knowing more specifically (than available from the data I collected) what kind of consciousness of connectivity to a wider African diaspora exists, and what cultural and political activities index a diasporic identity. This is important research for the future.

Before turning to the family reunion of another kin group, I want briefly to note how Andrea’s brother Gregory, who was four years younger than she was, responded to the Marshall family reunion event. He was motivated when he returned home to create a Marshall family website that displays a genealogical chart tracing four generations of kin connections, along with pictures of several individual family members. I was also able to document that for the Marshall kin group interaction intensified and expanded after the reunion. There were more frequent visits to family living in Canada, first-time visits to siblings living in England, and more frequent visits to New York City from family in these countries and from Barbados. Andrea carries on a weekly email exchange with her half-sister in Barbados. Andrea’s father, who became a wiz in operating hi-tech computer programs, tells me he now has weekly face-to-face conversations with family members in ‘real time’ – using the ‘instant messenger’ computer program to talk directly to family members. And for those who also have a camcorder camera attached to their computers, he is able to see the people with whom he is talking. ‘Does this make you feel closer,’ I asked. ‘Definitely … we have never been so close since we were little in Barbados.’
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The Bishops

The 1995 Grenada family reunion was also the first of its kind for this core kin group. It brought together approximately 250 people who came from places such as England, Germany, Canada, Aruba, Trinidad, Guyana, Puerto Rico, the USA – ‘even someone from Africa came’. Unlike the Marshall reunion, the number of kin who came outstripped the number living on the island, and large numbers of those who attended had never met before. Norma, the 39-year-old woman I interviewed who works as a dental assistant in New York City, tells me that ‘when I was sent to meet some of them [unknown kin] at the airport [in Grenada], I could recognize them because their faces look like family – we feature each other [a frequently used phrase for recognizing family connections based on facial features].’ Relatives living on the island who participated in the reunion ritual included Norma’s mother, sister, maternal aunt, father’s brother and ‘my father’s outside kids and their children, and my mother’s brother’s children (inside and outside) and their children’.

The 250 family members spent a week together in August engaged in a fairly elaborate itinerary of activities that included participating in Carnival, swimming at the famous Gran Anse beach, visiting ‘family land’ and old family houses, holding a special church ceremony, visiting a plantation, partying (dancing, drinking and having a fête), putting on various performances, and examining what Norma considered the central feature of the reunion: the huge family tree that had been drawn on a large canvas and put up on an outside wall for all to see. She explained that it was the idea of drawing up a family tree that gave birth to the idea of having a reunion. She, her sister and her paternal male cousin had put it together. The idea originally came from the cousin, a gynaecologist in Washington DC. Neither he nor his children had visited Grenada, unlike Norma, her husband, her daughter and her sister who frequently visited Grenada. Norma explains that it was her cousin who was motivated to have a family reunion:

because he often meet people that have the same last name as we do. And he keep trying to trace his family. He keep trying to trace because every time he would meet someone and they have the same last name, he would ask them, who is their mother, who is their brother, who is their sister? And he keep asking. And sometimes he, they, we, just couldn’t get to the bottom of it, with the same last name. Who is your family? And they tell him but he couldn’t get the link of it, cannot put it all together. And often that happened to him and he felt very bad. So that’s what really happen because he really wanted to know, how do you call it, his race. That’s when he started writing, to make a [genealogical] chart. Well my sister knew him and so they both put their ideas together, and that is when we said, we gonna have a family reunion, to see where everybody comes from. So it took us a lot of years. About four years, we’ve been planning it. Four years! We had a small one, but it was just our little family. It wasn’t even a family reunion. But the one I talking about that took four years to put together. It was, oh, I just can’t tell you [how great it was] … the family tree. I remember my sister saying it go back to the eighteenth century. But all I really wanted, really, is to go to Grenada and see how much of us there is, who is who and you know.
Norma goes on to say that:

The family reunion was very exciting – everyone get to know each other. My daughter also very excited. She learned who to call ‘uncle’ and ‘auntie’. I was excited to see people I hadn’t seen for a long time and to meet people I never met. I plan to contact them if I travel to where they live, places like Boston, Aruba, England, Germany, Canada.

Towards the end of my interview with Norma, I asked whether she thought the 1995 Grenada family reunion was the beginning of a new tradition. Her answer differs sharply from the way Andrea experienced the Barbados reunion. Norma felt there was no reason to have another big family reunion because ‘we all met; next one, it will have to be up to the children’. This suggests that the 1995 Grenada reunion, though much larger and more formally organized than the Marshall reunion, is not likely to become a tradition. It had accomplished its purpose, which, according to Norma, was to find and meet family in Grenada, a place considered ‘home’. And this is what made it a joyous, empowering experience. One might note that Norma shares with Andrea the concept of a Caribbean place identity – ‘home’ – where the core kin group originated, where kin elders still live, and to where some of the migrants at the reunion intend to return to live.

The Bishops’ reunion required longer and more complicated preparations than the Marshalls’. It began with a search for relatives identified by ‘name’, entailed contacting them and then arranging to assemble a large number of people who did not formerly know they were kin. It also resulted in a huge depiction of the Marshalls’ family tree ‘with its 210 long branches and 110 small branches’. This genealogy was displayed at the reunion for all to examine, to be impressed with and to feel empowered by its size. A compressed representation of the genealogical tree was put on a pin and on a T-shirt, and distributed as memorabilia of the event.

Reflecting on how the reunion affected family relations, Norma stated that it did bring family closer together. Members living in different countries began visiting one another more often. She also commented that the Bishop reunion had inspired a number of other people from the island to hold similar family reunions.

The Williams

In turning to the Williams we find some new complexities of kin and place identity and a different slant on what the family reunions signify for their participants. I report on three of the Williams’ reunions: a small family reunion of 21 cousins that preceded and promoted the two large family reunions: the first one in Trinidad in 1993 to which an estimated 175 people came, and a second one in Barbados in 1995 when the same number were estimated to have come. Members of the Williams’ kin group were of middle to upper middle-class status with university educations. They can be characterized as belonging to transnational professional families with multiple-rooted identities and a cosmopolitan consciousness. I jointly interviewed two cousins who had assisted in organizing the two family reunions. They were offspring of the core kin
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group of sisters who initiated the family reunions. The husband of one of the cousins was also present and had assisted in the organizing of the reunions. The two cousins spoke of belonging to a group of cousins that saw one another frequently. The Williams’ core kin group now reside in northern urban centres where some hold positions that have them travelling widely around the world. The cousins described their kin group as follows: ‘Everyone is all over the place. Some are extremely well off; others have problems paying their monthly electric bill.’ Nonetheless, the cousins stated emphatically that the Williams regard themselves ‘as a very close-knit family … family is everything’.

The cousins, born in Trinidad, Barbados and Canada, have all lived part of their early lives with their grandmother in Trinidad. They also lived for shorter or longer periods with aunts located elsewhere. The idea of a ‘cousins’ reunion’ came from:

a general feeling that our grandmother was getting older; and since all of us had lived with her for at least a year or two or four at some time during our lives … and it is there we got the basic grounding and the feeling of pride; so we all wanted do something to celebrate her who through her children had given birth to us.

During Christmas 1992, the 21 cousins who had never all come together held a reunion in Trinidad. They put on a fashion show, sang, danced and showcased their talents:

honouring our grandmother during the whole thing and then we went to my grandmother’s house with tape recorder and pencil to get the stories and the background and the recipes. Our meeting [in Trinidad] proved to be such a love-fest that we decided let’s go for the big one.

While the idea for the 1993 big family reunion began during the cousins’ meeting in Trinidad in 1992, the notion was abetted by the fact that an uncle of theirs had gone to Barbados in the 1960s ‘to search the archives for our family roots, which he had wanted to trace back to Africa; but when it turned out that the root-work led him back to Ireland, he was upset and threw it away’. However, the mother of one of the interviewees ‘caught it and decided to see what she could do with it’. In the early 1990s she mobilized several people to work on the project, including her daughter and son-in-law [whom I was interviewing]. They phoned, wrote letters, looked at newspapers and used computer programs to produce a genealogy that went back to 1702! The ‘founding ancestors’ constituted three different intermarrying families in Barbados and began when a white (Irish) Barbadian man divorced his white wife to marry his housekeeper who was of part-African ancestry. The genealogy, produced as a book, was 49 pages long, had entries for some 150 people and was called Family cōmmix ’93: our family’s story (first edition). Its preface states that it is written as ‘an introduction for an extended family where connections and relations can be initiated, and … for a better understanding of the past where our children may grow knowing their roots’ (1993: i). ‘Cōmmix,’ I was told, ‘means to mix together, blend, to mix smoothly and acceptably together’. The term was printed on the back of T-shirts that had a
According to the cousins, a death in the family that occurred just before the Trinidad reunion made the older people want to have another reunion as soon as possible. ‘They wanted to experience it again and meet all the people they hadn’t known or seen for a long time.’ In July 1994 a newsletter appeared to which one of cousins had contributed. It was called *The drum: one sound – our family cōmmix news*. The one-sound drum icon represented, as of old in Africa, a ‘news conveyor’ that ‘will be our link with the past as we continue to discover more names for our individual family tree … [it] will make our bonds stronger’. The newsletter also announced that the second Williams reunion would be held in Barbados in 1995.

Barbados was chosen because a large part of the family had ancestors living there and because the African Americans who came to the Trinidad reunion wanted to have the next one in Barbados. The 1995 reunion had many ‘new faces we had not seen before’, based on a further tracing of genealogical links and on information obtained at the 1993 reunion. The cousins mentioned that the large contingent of African Americans who came said they had no previous knowledge of their genealogical connections with West Indians and did not feel closely connected to a recently deceased ancestor. The cousins I was interviewing also saw the African Americans as wanting a stronger role in organizing subsequent reunions. This added to a resentment these younger cousins were already experiencing through feeling brushed aside by their parental generation who took over managing and expanding a range of activities related to institutionalizing the family reunions. It had been decided in 1995 that the reunion was to be an event that occurred annually or biannually. When I interviewed the cousins in early 1998 another smaller family reunion organized by the African Americans was planned for later in the year. It was to take place in the Poconos in New York State, at an expensive black resort. The cousins did not attend, but their parents’ generation did ‘in order to make sure that the rest of the family’s vote is being heard’.

Unlike the Marshalls and Bishops, the Williams family reunions have become an institutionalized recurrent event. This has involved reaching out to increase the size, breadth, generational depth and formality of family reunions. It has also meant that a ‘homeland’ place-centred identity for holding family reunions was abandoned as the connections linking some of the people no longer focused on a place-centred ‘home’ identity in the Caribbean. The cousins I interviewed claimed to feel distanced from the organization that emerged. They saw that the older generation engaged in ‘power plays’ and competition between those whose primary self-identity was African American (with distant Caribbean ancestry) and those whose primary self-identity was African Caribbean. These tensions led to a move to establish a junior branch
within *Family cōmmix* for those who had spent time in the Caribbean as children, even if not born there, and who chose to self-identify as African Caribbean.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This abbreviated account of my three case studies indicates that rituals of family reunions are about reaffirming kin connections and creating new ties among folk who are widely dispersed internationally. The rituals publicly reassert the existence of a distinct kin-based collective identity. Although African-Caribbean migrants usually try to maintain transnational kin ties, their continual migrations across countries have often caused a weakening, and sometimes a loss, of these connections. Family reunion rituals are designed to offset this. They occur because losing kin contact and regaining it *matters*. It matters because of the precept that ‘*knowing your family is knowing yourself*’. And this ‘*knowing*’ includes knowing about your ancestors and the kinds of lives they lived. The family reunion rituals I studied were highly successful in achieving these goals. Moreover, following the reunion rituals, contact with kin was intensified and considerably expanded in all three cases studied. It is worth noting that the positing of an indissoluble connection between self-identity and a kin-based collective identity sets off this African-Caribbean concept of self-identity from that prevalent in mainstream USA where the individualism of one’s identity is stressed.

Yet ‘*knowing family*’ had differently nuanced meanings in the three case studies. The size of the kin group that came together, and the meeting of new relatives, was significant for Norma in the Grenada reunion. It also played an important role in the Trinidad and Barbados reunions of the Williams family. Norma, who grew up in Grenada, was already immersed in close family ties, visited Grenada annually, was building a house there and had plans to return in a few years. She already had strong family ties, which the reunion ritual enlarged; Andrea, on the other hand, was engaged in actively acquiring family ties and constructing a new identity. What mattered to Norma was knowing that she *belonged* to a large kin group and that all of them ‘*make it*’ (have gained *good jobs*). Norma’s kin group included a mixture of working-class and middle-class people with either advanced technical training after high school or with college and postgraduate degrees. This class element was also present in the two large Williams reunions. As the cousins commented, the core kin group of organizers held a cosmopolitan status. In addition, generational and ethnic-based differences appeared to create tensions in these reunions. What mattered to Andrea was the intense and personalized sense of belonging that inspired her desire to return to Barbados, her newly acquired home (which she did three years later). It was this more personalized sense of belonging to a significant kin group that characterized the smaller cousins’ meeting in Trinidad. These nuanced differences can be related to whether one was born or grew up in the Caribbean or in the northern metropoles. They also reflect generational differences. Nonetheless, the individuals interviewed all felt that the reunion ritual was an empowering experience. What was empowering was to know that you belonged to a large set of kin-connected people with common ancestors that reach back in time and with kin connections stretching into the future.
Another important aspect of these rituals is the element of history-making. People assembled learn not only about their recent and founding ancestors or about size of their present-day kin network, but they also share memories about the cultural histories inscribed in their lives — thus learning about the historical contexts of their ‘roots’. This too was regarded as an essential part of coming to know yourself as a person, a person with a collectivized kin-based identity, a member of a distinct genealogical ‘imagined community’.\(^6\) The ritual instils memories of the past — the family past and what times were like then. For the dispersed migrants it reinscribes former memories of close family ties, creating a sense of continuity by instantiating a traditional notion about the closeness of family ties. This is meaningful to both the migrants and those who have remained ‘at home’.

What concept of African-Caribbean family and family values then is being projected and celebrated in the reunion rituals? Here one can note that the concept of family that operated in the reunions consisted of bilateral extended kin networks embedded in an ideology of mutual support that links family members within and across households, communities and nations. It is supported by the strong belief in family as lifeline (see Aschenbrenner 1983). Both in family emphasis and in the residential patterns practised, the family-centred template is one that is broadly consanguineal rather than conjugal centred. The relations central to the collective nature of kin units are sibling ties and ties among cousins.\(^7\) This concept of family also builds on the diverse social ties that emerge from different forms of conjugal unions, engaging in child fostering practices and maintaining strong consanguineal links within and across generations. There is a broad inclusiveness to this notion of family, making its boundaries highly elastic.\(^8\)

Experiencing and celebrating the sentiment of ‘we all family’ during the reunions entailed a certain amount of social levelling — a diminishing of the social distinctions among kinfolk that exist in other contexts. It was the perceived absence of this egalitarian sentiment in the Williams reunions that led the young cousins to point to the fissures they felt existed. Nonetheless, the reunions projected a notion of family attractive to the interviewees. Family came to constitute something akin to a socio-religious group, linking you to a past that shapes who you are and underwriting a future through family continuity. It was reason enough to want ‘to keep the family thing going’ (cf. Chamberlain 2000: 126).\(^9\)

In the Caribbean, where transnational migrations have been a distinct feature of these island societies since the mid-nineteenth century and perhaps earlier, this desire for family connectivity is not new. What is new is enacting this desire in the form of family reunion rituals, cultural practices that in the African-Caribbean region appear to have begun sometime in the 1970s (for Nevis, see Olwig 1993: 192–6). Changing world conditions have facilitated their occurrence — the increased income of many migrants, the increased ease of transnational air flights and the hi-tech computer-based communications revolution. The latter directly affects kin connectivity by making it easier to access information on genealogical connections, to sustain frequent contact through email and to engage with kinfolk in weekly and even daily ‘face-to-face conversations in real time’. This space–time compression of ‘new age’ technology has opened new ways for African Caribbeans to sustain, re-establish and intensify their
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family relations. In addition, African-American concern with ‘roots’ and the growth of ‘heritage industries’ in the Caribbean, underwritten since the 1970s by its principal industry of tourism, has contributed to fostering an interest in holding family reunions (see Olwig 1999a). This influence can be seen in both the Bishops and Williams reunions where tracing genealogies to founding ancestors and producing large family trees played a central role, along with visiting family land, houses and heritage sites.

It is true that the heritage industries and festivals reify ‘history’ and ‘culture’. Likewise, family trees, family reunion newsletters and memorabilia T-shirts help objectify the concept of ‘family’. However, these new developments do not obliterate the real personal sentiments individuals have about their family, its history or its cultural values. Concepts such as heritage and roots are often consequential to people’s understanding and sentiments about their history, culture and, in this case, their particular family forms and values. What this study reveals is that for African-Caribbean transnational migrants ‘living in the diaspora’, their distinct ‘Creole’ concept of family provides them with a fundamental collective kin-identity they wish to preserve, celebrate and transmit.

The three case studies raise a number of interesting questions for further research. I mention here only three. Comparisons with other ethnic groups and time periods would be of interest. Here one might note that African Americans have a longer tradition of holding family reunions in which rituals seem to have a somewhat different focus (see Aschenbrenner 1983; Harrison 1995; Jones 1980). Brackette Williams stated (in a telephone conversation) that while African-American family reunions began after emancipation, in the 1930s when southern plantations became historic sites, the reunions would take place there. Both white and black folk who ‘belonged’ to the plantation would come together, making the ‘ole plantation’ a symbolic site where they could meet without having to acknowledge the specific interracial production of black and white relatives during and after slavery. These reunions also made public a symbolic proprietary claim that African Americans had on the heritage plantation. Another issue is the role of family reunion rituals in heightening a consciousness of living in a diaspora, of adding a diasporic identity to the transnational family/kin identity. There is also the question of whether the home country will remain the anchoring place of identity and periodic return over the generations and of how a rapidly changing world situation will affect the nature of cross-border, transnational kin ties and the meanings attached to the culturally specific concepts of family.

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Notes

1. See Basch et al. (1994) and Glick-Schiller and Fouron (2001) for discussion of the concepts of ‘transmigrant’ and ‘transnational nations’, and for rich ethnographic accounts of transnational family life. See Chamberlain (1997, 2000) and Olwig (1999b) for analyses of transmigrants’ oral histories relating to family.

2. In local usage an ‘outside child’ generally refers to a man’s child who is born out of wedlock in a relationship that is not subsequently converted into a coresidential consensual union or a state- and church-sanctioned marriage. Mothers do not use the term, regardless of the legal status of a child of theirs. According to the state-sanctioned definition, however, 75 to 80 per cent of children in the West Indies are born out of wedlock, namely in relationships that have not been state- and church-sanctioned at the time of the birth of a child. ‘Wedlock’, when it occurs, usually takes place after the birth of a child or two.

3. ‘Bajan’ is the term Barbadians use for their Creole language, food and lifestyle. Since Independence in 1966 Bajan has increasingly become a way of asserting that one is a ‘true, true’ Barbadian. This references what they regard as their culturally distinct non-English lifestyle, which coexists with their knowing how to speak and act according to the hegemonic British (and now US) lifestyles. Barbadians, like other West Indians, engage in practising a linguistic and cultural duality that entails code switching.

4. In her study of West Indians living in England, Chamberlain (2000: 126) also found that their concept of family, with its values and prescriptions, is what lay at the heart of the political and cultural identity they developed abroad. This was the legacy they most wanted to transmit.

5. Both size of the kin group and the achievements of individuals were important components in the African-American family reunions described by Harrison (1995). On learning that I was writing about family reunions, an African-American graduate student recalled that she went to the first one at the age of ten and found it truly impressive. But, she added, the more recent one meant more to her because it created for her ‘a certainly about my going on to graduate school’.

6. Abbey Lincoln, the US jazz singer, incorporates this notion in her song ‘You Got Some People in You’, which lists (and praises) all the past people ‘who make you who you are’.

7. This is also reported for African-American family reunions in the US South (Jones 1980: 49–66).

8. These African-Caribbean concepts of family have drawn on and reworked past West African concepts of family as lineage. Family as lineage, though greatly modified today,
Celebrating ourselves continues to inform how family is viewed and constructed (see Chamberlain 2000; Sutton 1997 and 1998).


References
