

Lisa Johnson

MOVES SPACES PLACES

The Life Worlds of
Jamaican Women in Montreal.
An Ethnography

[transcript] Culture and Social Practice

From:

Lisa Johnson

Moves - Spaces - Places

The Life Worlds of Jamaican Women in Montreal. An Ethnography

October 2021, 192 p., pb., Dispersionsbindung

38,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5808-8

E-Book:

PDF: 37,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5808-2

In the complex and multi-layered process of migration and identity-building, classical migration theories and approaches of transnationalism seem no longer able to grasp how belonging and home are to be found in movement. This ethnography leads the reader into the lives of five Jamaican women in Montreal; their daily practices and experiences, their spaces of communion, their memories and projections for the future. Lisa Johnson sheds light on the mobile biographies and migratory agency of her interlocutors by following the intricate mental and physical trajectories of their deep-rooted yearning to return home.

Lisa Johnson, born in 1988, is an associated postdoc researcher at the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Trier and a lecturer for Cultural Studies at Saarland University. She completed her doctorate in the field of cultural anthropology in 2020 as a member of the DFG-funded International Research Training Group Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces at Trier University. Her main research areas focus on mobility, migration and return migration as well as transculturality, music and sound, in Jamaica and North America.

For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/en/978-3-8376-5808-8

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Acknowledgments

“Knowledge is power. [...]. Study and examine all, but choose and follow the good. The knowledge you have acquired so far is no end in itself but a reminder for the further responsibilities that await you” (H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I. qtd. in Selassie/ Tafari 2004: 33-34).

Writing this book was an exigent balancing act between scholarly intent, familial responsibility and spiritual growth. Ultimately, this study is a perpetual reminder to be content and thankful for the immense privilege of having gained a deeper knowledge and having spent time with people and places that –both in a professional and personal way– truly move me. In times of the current pandemic, ethnographic fieldwork as it was pursued here seems as if from another time; especially, with its close personal contact with fellow humans in far-away places and its immediacy of sensory and affective perceptions. Therefore, I am extremely grateful to have been able to finish this project in late February 2020. My sincere gratitude goes out to the inspiring women who agreed to be the interlocutors of this study. Thank you for sharing your time, your experiences and your personal viewpoints with academia and me.

I am forever indebted to the DFG-funded International Research Training Group “Diversity: Difference in Transcultural Spaces” for supporting my research project through a programmatic and scholarly frame as well as monetary funding. Thanks to the speakers, the faculty and my dear colleagues at the University of Trier, Saarland University, University of Luxembourg and Université de Montréal for the open-minded discussions as well as the dynamic interdisciplinary and transatlantic exchanges. My special thanks to the entire coordination team, above all Klemens Wedekind, and to my lector Anna Maria Duplang.

‘Jungle academia’ is a better place thanks to people who are truly willing to guide, mentor and lead young scholars in their formative years. I am very grateful for my great supervisors, Michael Schönhuth and Astrid Fellner, who were constant advisers, constructive critics and encouragers throughout this entire process. Thank you both!

My deepest gratitude goes out to my family, especially to my grandparents, my mother and my wonderful husband. Without your continuous support, love and

care, this project would have never become a reality. Thanks and blessings go out to my Jamaican family at 'yard' and abroad, the immediate and the extended ones!

Abstract

The following ethnography provides a deep insight into the life worlds of Jamaican women in Montreal. Historically, Jamaicans primarily migrated to Anglophone cities in Canada, the USA, or the UK. In the mid-1950s, the government of Quebec began recruiting care and domestic workers from the Caribbean through the so-called West Domestic Scheme. The impact of this labour migration – mostly performed by women from Jamaica – has received little attention in the scholarly literature to date. Thus, this study offers a first approach to understand motives, narratives, practices, and perspectives of second and third generation Jamaican migrant women in Montreal. Here, socio-cultural and bodily practices as well as processes of inclusion and exclusion play an important role to examine the diversity of their individual ways of life. Through a deep ‘immersion’ (Ingold 2007) into the daily lives of five female interlocutors, the ethnography provides a discernment of the construction of their ‘beyond transnational’ belongings and identities, and opens up a understanding of the women’s sense of self. Moreover, the ‘multi-sited’ (Marcus 1995) study actively follows the interlocutors on their journeys ‘home’ and analyses strategic forms of migratory return and mobility. The temporary or final return to Jamaica emerges as a life-long, multi-layered process that reveals profound yearnings for childhood memories, traditions, places, culture and people. Here, the ethnography highlights the relevance of the recourse to and the passing on of intergenerational knowledge about Jamaica as a continuously oscillating narrative and physical practice. Utilizing social networks to family, kin and friends across cultural, geographical and national borders unfolds as an important key to endure a life that has a ‘here’ and a ‘there’ (Simmons 2010) at the same time. Hence, Jamaican women’s mobility functions as a dynamic, pragmatic, indeterminate, and irreversible tool of migratory agency and belonging.

The study was developed within the framework of the DFG-funded International Research Training Group “Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces” and resulted in a dissertation at the department of Ethnology at the University of Trier, Germany.

Entry and Framework

1 Introduction

“More Jamaican women migrating to Canada, Statistics reveal” is a headline in the Jamaican newspaper *The Gleaner* in January (2018) discussing the recent census results gathered in Canada from 2012 to 2016. The data indicates that almost 20,000 more Jamaican women than men migrated to Canada within that time span, demonstrating a recent disparity in migrants’ gender distribution. The socio-economic phenomenon of Jamaican women contributing as labour workers to the Canadian economy is, however, not new. Initially, Jamaican men were among the first Caribbean people to enter the country during the colonial period to work in the mining industries. After World War II, men worked seasonally in the horticulture industry or as railroad labourers. However, women started to dominate Jamaican migration to Canada in the mid-1950s. Each year from 1955 onwards, women from Jamaica and Barbados between the ages of 18 and 35, received entry visas to work in Canadian households and nursing professions (Thomas 2012). During this period, over 2,000 women took the opportunity and entered the Canadian territories (Magocsi 1999). As immigration policies changed to a less discriminatory points system in the 1960s and the *Family Reunification Act* after 1970 allowed spouses and children to join family members who had migrated earlier (Kelley/Trebilcock 2010), Jamaican migration to Canada remained increasingly steady. Already in the 1980s, with the intensification of international relations as well as neoliberalist and globalizing processes, the focus of migration research expanded. Alongside an increasing interest in intersectional parameters of migrants, the positionality of women as social agents in the migratory process became relevant.

According to a report from the *International Migration Organization* (IOM) in 2018, an estimated number of 1.3 million Jamaican-born persons permanently reside abroad, amounting to at least 36.1 percent of the national population (Thomas-Hope et al. 2018). Additionally, the foreign-born second and third generations –who associate their ethnic origin and identity with Jamaica– bring the total number that comprises the diaspora to a size equivalent to that of the population of 2.9 million of Jamaica itself (Plaza/Henry 2006: xvii). Jamaican-Canadians make up one of the largest non-European ethnic groups in Canada and are the leading collective of West Indian migration in general. Census data of 2016

shows 309,485 Jamaicans with permanent residency or citizenship are living in Canada (Statistics Canada 2017). Since the conditions for Jamaican immigration and visa requirements were tightened in the UK in 2003, in the USA after 9/11 and recently during Donald Trump's presidency, Canada has become the country of choice for many immigrants (not only from the Caribbean). Most Jamaicans settle in Anglophone metropolitan areas such as Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton. Currently, 11,775 Jamaicans reside in Quebec, of which the majority has settled in the metropolitan area of Montreal (Statistics Canada 2017). However, the available categories for 'ethnic origin' implemented in the Canadian census are prone to inaccuracy since individuals can make multiple choices among numerous different national and ethnic categories, such as Black, West Indian, Jamaican, Caribbean, African. This choice leads to inexactness about the genuine number of Jamaican-born residents residing in Montreal, especially as ethnic belonging or identity are not solely grounded in place of birth. Additionally, intra-provincial labour migration –for example people who enter Canada through Ontario and then work in Quebec– is not sufficiently documented.

Montreal is attractive for Jamaican women seeking economic opportunities in the domestic and care work sector, in spite of a French language barrier and a previously unknown place compared, e.g., to the Ontario region. As the second-largest city in Canada, Montreal already hosts a considerable number of Francophone Caribbean immigrants, specifically from Haiti. Still, Jamaicans shape, among other immigrants, parts of the city's socio-cultural life and contribute to the diversification of a so-called 'intercultural' setting in the province of Quebec. Jamaican popular culture is present in the Anglophone Canadian media. Caribbean carnival parades such as Montreal's *Carifesta* or Toronto's *Caribana* are symbolic representations of a 'successful integration' of Afro-Caribbean people into Canadian society and a source of many articles both journalistic and academic (e.g. Henry/Plaza 2019) as are other aspects of popular culture such as Rastafari or Reggae music (e.g. Price 2015; Austin 2007; Walcott 2003). Besides, typical research projects on Jamaican migration to Canada often focus on negative impacts such as drug crime, gang violence and deportees (e.g. Barnes 2009; Golash-Boza 2014) or on tourism (e.g. Bennet 2017; Burman 2011). In addition, Toronto (e.g. Rose 2016; Simmons 2010; Toney 2010; Hepburn 2019) represents *the* Jamaican enclave in Canada and is therefore the research area of first choice for many scholarly inquiries. However, Montreal as a research area is underexposed, e.g., in comparison to Toronto, Vancouver or Hamilton. The book "Jamaicans in Canada: When Ackee meets Codfish" (Gopie 2012), which was released for the celebration of Jamaica's 50 years of independence (1962-2012), depicts the impact that Jamaican people have had in Canada over the centuries. The volume features profiles of 250 Jamaican-Canadians that

“help this and other Canadian cities run, manage the health-care system, educate, pass and enforce and litigate the law, grow business ventures, volunteer, donate tens of millions of dollars to cultural and educational institutions, [...] drive the trains, sweep the streets and care for the infirm. [...] in every province and territory, Jamaicans have set down roots. [...]. This odyssey has been going on since before Canada was a country; since before the inhabitants of the former British colony were a free people” (Gopie 2012: 1).

The publication recognizes that there are not only socio-economically successful or popular migrants such as famous Olympic champion Donovan Bailey, but also many Jamaicans who work in middle-class jobs or the lower service sector, drawing a more differentiated picture about the Jamaican immigrant experience. This study will highlight that Jamaican migrant experiences in Quebec, especially those of women, deviate from those in Anglophone Canada and are rather invisible to the host society in Montreal. Hence, this study contributes to this desideratum of research. Concerning Jamaican women's individual interpretations of migration motives, practices and perspectives in Quebec, this study also aims at bridging a transatlantic gap between scholars in Europe and North America in this respective field, especially to those researchers who analyse migratory life worlds beyond the assumption of methodological nationalism towards an ‘intertwined modernity’ (Beck 1998).

My interest in the topic of Jamaican migration to Montreal developed during my five-year stay in Kingston (Jamaica). Respecting the fact that Canada, after the USA, plays an essential role in the emigration objective of many families and individuals in Jamaica, I quickly learnt that representatives of different social classes of Jamaican society – from worker to university graduate – are mobile in various ways (i.e. mentally, virtually, physically) and aim at migrating to North America. Highly qualified and professionally successful people often migrate by choice to metropolitan centres; female and male skilled workers from the working and middle class mainly migrate due to poverty, labour market opportunities or family reasons. For many Jamaicans this ‘culture of migration’ has been a ubiquitous *modus operandi* since the 1950s (Thomas-Hope 1988; 2002; 2010) with a majority hoping to find a better life away from the island. After admission to the transatlantic German-Canadian International Research Training Group “Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces” at the University of Trier, I decided to take a closer look at the Canadian side of this phenomenon. Here, I deliberately chose Montreal as the research location because, as noted earlier, other cities seem to have been covered in the scholarly literature.

After my initial exploration phase in Montreal in July 2016, the focus of this study concentrated on a small number of Jamaican women. Five ethnographic portraits of women, who represent different migratory life pathways, unveil specific

temporal and spatial experiences. Each migratory trajectory aims to highlight socio-cultural practices and narratives concerned with relocation experiences as well as an individual yearning for the homeland. In an anthropological manner, I entered into the lives of the interlocutors and followed them, as much as possible and feasible, on their local ventures as well as on their travels overseas. Therefore, fieldwork was situated in different migratory stages in various places in Montreal, Toronto and Jamaica, following concepts of ‘multi-sited’ research (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 1996). The reason to focus primarily on women is a result of the inductive approach to the field. Prioritizing women to narrate their individual stories and implementing a gendered approach, however, enriched the study tremendously. Of course, these individual portraits are not meant to generalize experiences of Jamaican women in Montreal, nor their social networks or travels. Therefore, this study acknowledges the specific historical and socio-cultural impact that female migration from Jamaica has had on the province of Quebec. The simultaneous encountering of the ‘Jamaican’ and the ‘Québécois’ in the city of Montreal creates a distinct socio-cultural field in which my research interest lies. Due to their temporal-spatial absence from the Jamaican homeland, interlocutors, seem to bond together through the identification of Jamaica as their (imagined) homeland and place of ‘heart’. Concomitantly, they are part of a wider cosmopolitan culture in Montreal, which shapes their lives outside of typical migratory enclaves such as Toronto or New York City. A continuously growing number of Jamaican immigrants and an ongoing cultural diversification in Montreal requires taking a closer look at migration as a “cultural process linked to global and transnational forces” (Simmons 2010: 2). Globalization and its outcomes changed relations and the social stratification of migratory people over time and shifted cultural values concerning mobility, space, place and belonging. Critical aspects that affect not only transnational ties, but also the level of individual as well as group-based consciousness regarding identity and representation. Jamaican women form an intimate affiliation to the countries they live and lived in, tied together through a globally dispersed variety of social networks to different Jamaican diasporic localities. These networks also include relatively immobile people for whom connection improved through technological advancements over time: Easy and cheap air transportation, real-time electronic communication, same-day money transfers, all at once evoking a compression of space and time in a globalized world. For women, the cost of migration is high. They often carry the burden of sending remittances that feed and sustain their families in Jamaica, while leaving behind their children in the foster care of relatives. Hence, the connection to home is an important constant in their daily lives, for example, through technological-virtual communication practices or visiting Jamaica regularly (if possible). As this ethnography will show, many women manage to be proficient agents in the securing of their own and familial needs, even in times of struggle, isolation or setbacks. Their life worlds have a ‘here’ and

a 'there' (Simmons 2010: 169) of being and belonging to several diasporic places at the same time in different ways.

In Montreal, the observation and exploration of specific cultural practices became relevant. Daily practices of inclusion and exclusion mediate and articulate difference, identity and imaginaries in the context of historical transformations. Discourses about ethnic 'roots', memories and biographical accounts of the homeland and its people give insight into female perceptions of different contact zones and localities. The appropriation of certain spaces in Montreal, the stylization of the body or simply food-cooking practices are examples of ethnographic depictions that this study discerns. These socio-cultural practices inform about the inscription of diversity and difference in the minds and bodies of Jamaican women in Montreal. The ethnography emphasises, hereby, Jamaican women's feelings of isolation and homesickness as well as experiences with structural discrimination and racism that hinder comprehensive integration. Through the exploration of specific experiences, the ethnography also answers questions concerning the embodiment and mediation of 'othering' (Spivak 1985).

Although the core of this study focuses on diverse practices, narratives will be of specific relevance in analysing how female relatives – chiefly mothers and grandmothers – shape migratory practices and imaginaries through articulation. Intergenerational narratives, storytelling and handed down knowledge from ancestors play an important role in the choice of migration destinations, in the remembrance of Jamaica, and in the maintenance of certain cultural traditions and values. Accounts of women's life courses offer inside views into interpersonal family and kinship networks in relation to space, belonging, identity, and aspirations of return. Additionally, this study will discuss mobility after initial migration and return migration. According to the *International Migration Organization* (IOM), the voluntary return of Jamaican women (and men) is not yet systematically captured (Thomas-Hope et al. 2018: 36). In many cases, the move 'back home' is part of a series of returns of short duration and, for some, it becomes part of an ongoing cross-border residential and livelihood pattern (Thomas-Hope 2002). Here, diverse female strategies and decision-making processes concerning traveling or returning to 'their' homeland will become visible. The phenomenon of Jamaican returnee women is not only interesting because of their privilege of holding dual passports, but also because many returnees are economically powerful, which gives them options that extend beyond the boundaries of a socio-economically rather struggling island society. At the same time, these privileges do not safeguard them from unexpected disappointments.

Importantly, this study's returnees are not only ageing individuals as is typical in previous studies about Jamaican homeward migration (e.g. Horst 2013; Olwig 2012; Hepburn 2019), but also younger women who feel the urge to return to their ancestral homeland even though they have never physically departed from it.

Therefore, female returnees in this study highlight a complex interplay of cross-generational Jamaican belonging, responsibility and identity, which goes beyond living or being born abroad. Since these ‘voluntary’ home seekers and returnees are a minority group in the Jamaican context, their behaviours, expectations and difficulties differ widely from those of the local society; despite their self-assumed ‘shared’ ethno-cultural heritage. Hence, the analysis of the ethnographic portraits also examines the idea of the transformation of knowledge before, during, and after migratory movements as a dynamic process that constitutes meaningful interactions (Knoblauch 2005: 142 qtd. in Treiber 2013). Jamaican women’s migratory trajectories are often pre-structured by various, individual, preliminary expectations and imaginaries, by familial and social histories and networks as well as new adaptation strategies gained from the travel processes, in which new forms of contextual and situational knowledge about places, people, and particular localities in Jamaica is gained. This can also lead to a revision of interlocutors’ previous considerations about life in Montreal. Ultimately, a deep insight into the mediation and negotiation of cultural identity, belonging and displacement in a post-colonial world setting is given, in which new, conflictive boundaries and at times ‘myths’ about geographic spaces are discovered. Through flexibility, practicality and redefinitions of space, Jamaican women are hereby able to develop altered routes towards a desired future.