**Of “Madness,” Against Babylon:**

**A Story of Resistance, (Mis)Representation, and Paradox in the Caribbean**

# Abstract

This article provides a postcolonial feminist account of the complex politics of the Earth People, an anti-systemic movement in Trinidad and Tobago who organised against the post-independence status quo during the 1970-1980s. The purpose of the piece is twofold. Firstly, on a scholarly level, it endeavours to (re)tell a theoretically-driven empirically-based story of the nuances that surfaced during the Earth People’s resistance to “Babylon” (i.e. racial capitalism, Western institutions, rise of a post-colonial nationalist bourgeoisie). Secondly, on a political-epistemological level, we are countering conventional ways Caribbean people, histories, social movements, and the region at large are documented, studied, and ultimately written about within mainstream academia. To do so, we outline the fraught politics of (mis)representation that arise in established ethnography, with specific care afforded to the perspectives and political agency of participants from the movement. Our analysis emerges out of fieldwork guided by critical race theories, decolonial critique, feminist ethics, and community collaboration. Our methods included archival research, focus groups, oral histories, go-along interviews, and narrative inquiry with former members of the group. In general, the piece historicises the Earth People’s efforts to evade and defy colonial norms, capitalist logics, and Westminster state power by “returning to nature.” Further, we offer a synopsis of movement’s worldviews, social relations, and ideological standpoints, which despite being episodically paradoxical and not adopted widely throughout the Caribbean, merit further respective attention and critical scrutiny apropos regional posterity and orthodox academic knowledge production.

# Keywords:

Caribbean; postcolonial geography; race and representation; resistance; social movements

# Introduction

The Earth People, an anti-systemic movement in Trinidad and Tobago whose origin dates back to 1979, are not a well archived group. Broadly, they were an assemblage of Black/Afro-Caribbean political dissidents and nonconformists focused on returning to “nature” as a means of resisting the colonial worldviews, the Westminster System, and racial capitalism. They were oft-labelled “mad” and led by a woman.[[1]](#footnote-1) Consequently, over the past forty years, their experiences have either been lost, overlooked, or grossly distorted. Nevertheless, their history is of significance to the Caribbean, especially those concerned with the omission of women from the region’s historiography. Accordingly, this article explores the oppositional consciousness and direct actions of the Earth People as they responded to neocolonial governance in 1970-1980s post-independence Trinidad and Tobago. Our collaborative research with the group on their worldviews, daily practices, and gender relations enables us to offer insight into their politics and praxis (McKittrick, 2015), whilst simultaneously situating the movement in a Caribbean tradition of uprisings against Anti-Black/Anti-Indigenous dispossession, enslavement, and subjugation (Jackson, 2014; King, 2016).

In sharing this piece, we question the silence surrounding the Earth People, particularly given that their leader, “Mother Earth” (Jeanette Baptiste, 1934-1984), was a Black/Afro-Caribbean woman. Here, we agree with Caribbean cultural theorist Mohammed’s (2000, 218) assessment that the “writing of women into history must be viewed similarly as continuing the transparency of the past.” Moreover, we are wrestling with a scholarly reality, as identified by Caribbean feminist Barriteau (2003, 57), demonstrating that “an understanding of the operations of the social relations of gender... ...should be pivotal to any assessment and critiquing of Caribbean societies.” Thus, in addition to providing an expository narrative of the Earth People’s political ideology, we are querying why struggles for transformation in the region, principally those led by women, are not given more space in the annals of political history, geography, and academic knowledge production (Shephard, 2011). As a response, our piece explicitly aims to contribute to postcolonial feminist scholarship by sharing an account, informed by former members, of the group’s resistance and (mis)representation.

Correspondingly, as a feminist organiser and Afro-Caribbean woman who has lived in the region all her life (Author1) writing with a dissident researcher who has been living/waged in the circum-Caribbean for half a decade (Author2), we feel it imperative to ensure that marginalised movements, agitators, and deliberately-silenced voices from the Majority World be amplified. Notably, as a means to avoid domesticating and colonising said voices under the auspices of “proper” English and academic orthodoxy, Author1 has kept/written participant quotes in their original Trinidadian Creole. Thus, in agreeing with Davis (2004, 3) who states, “stories cement together generations of collective memory, embodying the historical, spiritual, social, and spatial,” what we are presenting is a theoretically-driven and empirically-based *story* of the complexities that emerged in the Earth People’s resistance to “Babylon” (i.e. racial capitalism, Western ideals, rise of a neocolonial national bourgeoisie) (Marley, 1983; Murrell, Spencer, and McFarlane, 1998). It is a story we feel is rich with insight and instruction vis-à-vis (non)emancipatory politics that carry relevance for the contemporary Caribbean.

# Research Methods and the Politics of (Mis)Representation

The way a place and its people are depicted is integral to how each are perceived by readers. Feminist scholar Mohanty (2003) posits that knowledge production seats the West at centre and measures all “Others” against its colonial standards and normative rules. For the Caribbean, with its history of imperialism, enslavement, diaspora, (purported) emancipation, ongoing erasures of Indigenous people (Newton, 2013), and multifaceted postcolonial present––it is paramount that stories about the region be told accurately, justly, and organically (Olaniyan and Sweet, 2010). As Willis, Williams, and Meth (2009, 25) state:

Representations of the Global South are important as they both reflect and help constitute relations between North and South. They are not neutral or necessarily harmless; rather they can reinforce negative and offensive opinions about the Global South as a whole...

...inequalities in power may seem hidden at first as the representations are so normalised and seemingly uncontroversial.

Arguably, research and analysis should be shared by people from, contributing to, and/or with commitments to a region, place, or community––as well as authors who are devoted to providing conscientious, vetted, and defensible representations of said places and communities. Accordingly, from the outset of our project, we wanted our writing to foreground the Earth People’s perspectives and thoughts about how they have been represented.

To accurately understand the historical-political context within which the Earth People’s praxis emerged, then, we conducted archival research in the West Indiana Special Collections (The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine), the Trinidad Express House archival library, and National Library of Trinidad and Tobago in Port of Spain. Diving into these archives gave detailed glimpses into the (post)coloniality of early independence in Trinidad and Tobago during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Newspaper articles, op-eds, photographs, and journal entries from an array of Caribbean scholars, artists, philosophers, musicians, organic intellectuals, and journalists provided an eclectic assortment of data sources. We chose this diverse selection of materials in order to mirror the heterogeneity of the region and make more plural and holistic our intersectional approach. The Caribbean is variegating and kaleidoscopic; we felt the research should engender this (Bogues, 2008; Henry, 2002; Reddock, 2014).

Ethnographic *vox populi* data was generated (Ackerly and True, 2010) through primary and secondary sources, and the use of mobile methods and oral testimony (Bissell, 2014). Our approach was explicitly convivial, listening-oriented, and dignity-anchored. On this front, Author1, in wanting participants to “co-create the research focus” (Atallah, et al, 2018, 501), collaboratively crafted (with interviewee input) semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and go-along walks in-and-around the village of Grande Riviere; ten kilometers from the Cachipa, Matelot forest where the Earth People originally resided. Author1 incorporated go-along interviews “in the bush” to assuage the potential pressure/coercion that participants might experience in more clinical (institiutional) settings, and glean their insights “on the move” during “life as it happened” (Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson, 2016, 683). The movement’s settling in the deep forest during the 1970-80s aligned with their belief in returning to “natural” ways of living in an effort to attain spiritual enlightenment and live “outside d system.” Participant engagement, conducted by Author1, included twelve people, seven of whom were in the movement.

Notably, we sought an extended personal narrative and oral testimony from the only remaining woman from the Earth People, referred to here as “Cool.” This was deliberate in our feminist research design and follows Caribbean historian Josephs (1997, 38), who explains:

Oral testimonies are also very important in the engendering process, especially in the Caribbean where oral tradition is a characteristic feature of life. Such testimonies are also vital to a fuller understanding of the historical experience of the Caribbean as women were not always given the same educational opportunities as men and so were less likely to have penned their views and recorded their experiences. And even when educational opportunities were provided for women, there were class differences that excluded a significant number of Caribbean women from being among the lettered.

The other sources were journalists who covered civil unrest in the 1970s, librarians familiar with the movement, and a close friend of Mother Earth. According to the participants, the Earth People had nearly 60 members in the early 1980s. They dispersed after the passing of Mother Earth in 1984 yet maintained some semblance of unity, with fifteen affiliates living in Grande Riviere today. We discovered, primarily from the oral testimony of Cool, that the Earth People (despite only having two women) had complex politics and dynamics surrounding gender––socially, spatially, and interpersonally. Further driving home the point that documenting women’s perspectives is crucial in knowledge production, ethical research, and matters of representation (Massiah, 2004; Lorde, 1984)––an assertion that is cardinal in postcolonial contexts, especially the Caribbean (Kempadoo, 2004; Momsen, 1993; Rowley, 2010).

Notably, our empirics section, which undermines the discipline of Geography’s propensity to “deny, avoid, suppress or downplay its emotional entanglements” in research (Davidson, Smith, and Bondi, 2012, 1), splashes in emotive prose whilst employing “strategies of conviction” used in Foucauldian discourse analysis and collective coding (Hay, 2016; Waitt, 2010, 228). By intentionally including select affective responses of Author1 in the reflexive narrative inquiry (Ackerly and True, 2010), we are aiming to at once disrupt contentions that academic analysis should be “objective” whilst defending the place that emotion has in scholarly writing­­––as marginalised scholars have been doing for decades (Morrison, 1988; Cusicanqui, 2010). This simultaneous disruption and defence is necessary given Geography’s obstinance and insularity apropos epistemological inclusion (Hawthorne and Meché, 2016), which as Noxolo (2017, 317) observes, “displays little practical contemporary openness to difference and diversity in its knowledge production processes.”

Interviewees from the Earth People wanted to speak/be quoted as a collective subject, with one unified voice, when giving their accounts of the movement. This is due in part to feeling they had been misrepresented in Cambridge University Press’s ethnography, *Pathology and Identity: The Work of Mother Earth in Trinidad* (Littlewood, 1993). As participants attested to, academic research and scholarship influences the ways a place (e.g. the Caribbean)––and its people (e.g. Afro-Caribbean dissidents)––are seen and thought of, especially when presented in the form of ethnography. As Whiffin (2003, 5) asserts:

It is now clear ethnography represents not scientific “facts,” but rather at best romanticised interpretations or, more dangerously, conscious or unconscious misrepresentations of societies, which perpetuated the power inequalities founded by the colonial system.

The participants from the Earth People disapproved of how they were portrayed in *Pathology and Identity*. While noting some of the details (as they *heard* them) were accurate, the errors they mentioned encompassed overgeneralisation, mistaken identities, cultural misunderstandings, name misspellings, and stories about members getting “bad vibes” and not consenting to the project yet being included anyway. When asked about their thoughts on the book, they expressed feelings of disenchantment, confusion, and frustration from being unable to either correct missteps, or even read it given many are from oral traditions. One participant, unsettled with the research process and presence of an outside ethnographer, shared their perspective:

He [Littlewood] say he want to write som’ting. When he come to talk to me now to talk, I start to get negative vibes, start to get bad vibes. I say, “I have no authority to talk to yuh.” And I didn’t talk to he. So anything he put in d book about me, he didn’t hear that from my mouth. Somebody tell he dat.

Another anonymous interviewee, suggesting the Earth People were portrayed in a negative and reductive light stated:

He misinterpret what was going on. Daz a wrong ting, is nothing like dat. It eh show a light or upliftment or a beam. He put it out wrong in a way dat people wouldn’t even understand dey life. It wouldn’t give people d knowledge of deyself. It could make d life look like some naked people in d book.

Willis, Williams, and Meth (2009, 30) write that “representations of other people and parts of the world as exotic were also part of colonial accounts between Europeans and Indigenous/racialised people.” This manner of description recreates tired, offensive, and erroneous stereotypes, tropes, and assumptions of people, as well as the Caribbean as a region.

Undeniably, there are many sides to one story/book/ethnography. The analyses we are sharing here are being offered nearly four decades after the research in question. Admittedly, our methods, approach, and techniques are limited and partial themselves. Therefore, this is neither an appraisal of any person’s character, nor a contention that we are definitively “right.” Having said this, our account is an evidence-based systemic critique, anchored in consensual reporting from participants, about the problematic way knowledge is produced within the academy. In particular, how the process of research and scholars from the Global North often represent and treat Majority World and marginalised Global Northern places and people as objects, projects, and case studies. Thus, while at times members spoke separately, in being guided by decolonial ethics (Smith, 2013) and respecting their requests, we are ascribing the collective alias of “EP” to all statements individuals from the Earth People made henceforth. There is risk this might either homogenise the group, or that a shared account may create a false meta-narrative. In considering the track record academics have with the participants, though, refusing to accommodate their wishes seemed far more dangerous and unethical than allowing them to speak with one shared voice––on their terms.

# Historicising the Earth People

## Forged from the Love of Unity(?): Post-Independence Trinidad and Tobago

In the mid-1900s, Trinidad and Tobago was on the brink of becoming a self-governing nation. The prospect of political liberation was set to be a new dawn for the twin-island state. Heightened anticipations about what life would be like free from colonial administrators, field overseers, and a foreign plantocracy were palpable. On August 31, 1962, Trinidad and Tobago became independent under the guidance of Dr. Eric Williams, party leader of the People’s National Movement (PNM). The nation now purportedly belonged to no one but itself, which came with a wave of societal excitement yet pronounced political turmoil. Paradox, too, was abound as the Westminster System remained intact and Trinbagonian citizens continued to owe allegiance to the monarchy, as well as “Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, Queen of Trinidad and Tobago.” This remained the case until 1976, when the country became a Republic under the Commonwealth. In short, post-independent Trinidad and Tobago’s socio-economic divisions, as well as the colonial/Westminister structure of governing, remained largely the same. Hence, while independence shifted the country’s geopolitical status and socio-cultural identity, questions surrounding freedom and change still remained––For whom? To what extent?

Throughout the 1960s, civil society in Trinidad and Tobago was calling for better infrastructure, more employment opportunities, a state commitment to cash-poor/working-class people, and the reduction of poverty (Millette 1995). Although the requests were aligned with the Williams administration’s professed vision, they were not met due to a focus on extractive growth, capitalist industrialisation, and foreign investment, i.e. the development of a plantation economy and dependency (Best, 1968). As Shah (2012) illustrates, the “children of Independence, who had reposed much faith in Eric Williams to lead them out of the constraints of colonialism into a more equitable, thriving nation, felt they had been cheated.” Trinidadian economist Ifill (1979) explains the jubilant spirit of emancipation that could have led to democratic, fair, and just social relations regressed into fractious partisan politics mired in internecine posturing. The radical aspirations and possibilities of the nascent liberated nation were shelved as political elites and the business class became preoccupied with short-term gain, vapid sloganeering, hostile demagoguery, and rousings of ethnic division.

Mkandawire (2013) theorises that challenges faced by postcolonial administrations related to political sovereignty are a result of the “continued influences of their erstwhile colonisers on the affairs of new nations”––a scenario in which imperial powers are bent on turning independence into “Flag Independence”––where all but the flag remains the same. As Fanon (1963, 100) articulates, wilful complicity is a problem:

The national bourgeoisie discovers its historical mission as intermediary. As we have seen, its vocation *is not to transform* the nation but prosaically serve as a conveyor belt for capitalism, forced to camouflage itself behind the mask of neocolonialism. The national bourgeoisie, with no misgivings and with great pride, revels in the role of agent in its dealings with the Western bourgeoisie.

In short, “sickening mimicry” becomes the state of things (Fanon, 1963, 235). In this vein, when the opportunity for structural transformation arose, Trinidad’s politicians stood still. The country post-1962 was the same old colonial scene with nothing much actually changing besides it now calling itself “self-governing.” In diagnosing the nation’s governance at the time, Best (1968) suggested that upon gaining independence party officials reverted to a mercantilist concept of the State. One that allowed the ruling class to consolidate power, centralise authority, control public education, and dominate all aspects of local-national thought, expression, and socio-political behaviour. Similarly, as Rodney (1975), Jones (from Davies 2007), and Fanon (1963) alluded to, the masses had become so accustomed to autocratic power they found it difficult to let go of plantation social relations and create anew. The complexion of the state and elites changed, but the complexities, hierarchies, and negligence remained the same. This is a far-reaching reality that remains for much of the English-speaking Caribbean (Lamming, 2009; Tafari-Ama, 2017).

## 1970s Trinidad and Tobago: From Black Power to Back to “Nature”

It is important to note that despite its influence, neocolonialism is not a totalising force. Heading in the 1970s, Trinidad and Tobago became marked by an aura of disruption and revolt. National liberation struggles in Africa, anti-colonial movements across the region, the push for civil rights in the United States, and a host of other global struggles for racial and economic justice motivated the Trinbagonian masses. The assertion of Black lives and worth around the world, as well as in the Caribbean, deeply resonated with the eventual members of the Earth People. In this politically-charged climate, Calypsonians and reggae artists throughout the region like Stephanie Samuels, The Mighty Duke, Chalkdust, African Princess, The Mighty Sparrow, Jimmy Cliff, and Bob Marley produced a variety of songs embracing and amplifying Black identity and struggle. They were framing emancipation not as a gift to be granted from on high––but as an act that people could engage in themselves.

Due in part to cultural producers like those noted above, resistance and revolution were not far-off concepts in the Caribbean. 1970s Trinidad and Tobago, a time in which the “halcyon days of nationalist euphoria had drawn to a close” (Millette 1995, 62), was marked by a spate of uprisings. As Williams (1970) admitted, the “beginning of the Decade of the Seventies found the Caribbean in a revolutionary mood.” It produced multiple civic groups that shared common goals pertaining to paradigm shift and socialist change. Equally, the “massive strikes and street demonstrations that erupted in Curaçao, Bermuda, The Bahamas, Jamaica, Trinidad, Aruba, and Anguilla between 1968 and 1970, and the army mutiny, which almost toppled the Trinbago government in 1970 are evidence enough of the strength of the Caribbean people” (Ryan and Stewart 1995, 25). The Black Power Movement in 1970 was emblematic of what came to follow. It spurred a plethora of mobilisations, affinity groups, and protests, which received wide coverage.

Later, in the mid-1970s, as the Earth People explained, Mother Earth had a series of visions. Effectively, it was revealed to her that patriarchal Christianity was a falsehood and that the Earth had actually been created by a fecund spiritual woman, “Earth Mother,” who embodied the fertile and nurturing essence of the natural world. According to the cosmology, white colonisers, modern science, and industrial technology emerged out of the work of Earth Mother’s treasonous son (the Christian God). Thus, to rectify the ensuing planetary imbalance and enslavement of Black people, Mother Earth needed to “Free Up the Nation” by inspiring the masses to return to nature, go naked, and live an egalitarian and agrarian life before the end of times arrived. Aside from a few pieces of literature about medical diagnoses and the perceived psychopathology and “madness” of Mother Earth (scrutiny women disproportionately face [Ussher, 2011]), this is what can be found on the movement’s ontological and spiritual genealogy. Importantly, our aim here is not to provide a diagnosis of this belief system, but to share participant-sourced details about the Earth People’s political organisation and day-to-day social relations.

In 1979, Mother Earth, with her partner Lakatan (Rupert Cox) and children, moved from Laventille to the countryside of Cachipa, Matelot. As noted by members, the shift from an urban industrial life of concrete and steel to rural agro-ecological subsistence living amongst flora and fauna was significant in a multitude of ways. It allowed them to rebuke consumerist practices within mainstream capitalist society, as well as elude state surveillance. This caught on. Over the next few years, neighbours, friends, and villagers who heard Mother Earth speak at public engagements locked arms. “Most of the Earth People seemed to have joined just because Mother Earth happened to be recruiting nearby” (Littlewood 1993, 285). Essentially, she was politically educating devotees about the trappings of neoliberalism, neocolonialism, and the nation-state, but in colloquial ways. Consciousness-raising that enriched local listeners personally, socially, and spirituality. Her many dreams and revelations guided members to rename themselves after fruits and vegetables as a means to attenuate hierarchy, to live more closely with/organically off the land, and to cast aside Western inhibitions and respectability politics (inclusive of clothes). “There is no recognised subgroup, no hierarchy, no recognition of any kind of prestige” (Littlewood 1993, 199). Mother Earth passed in 1984. Subsequently, the movement fractured, with some members moving out of the community and others, approximately 15, still residing in Cachipa.

Although egalitarian and eco-utopian in vision, having a woman leader, changing names, and going “back to nature” did not erase certain problematic norms. As will be outlined in the sections to come, unequal power relations and gendered essentialisms still remained in some forms. Mother Earth’s leadership role and political convictions, although contestable and by no means immune to critique (i.e. repressive and reprehensible on some fronts, e.g. homophobia), do remain relevant to the region­. For posterity, lessons to be learned, and in some instances, things to avoid. Despite it all, and although short-lived, we argue the Earth People’s story should be shared with scholars internationally and Caribbean generations to come. Neither because it is a blueprint nor model to follow, but because it is a part of the Caribbean––its political history, cultural tapestry, and spiritual ethos. We are also magnifying the story of the Earth People as a means to set the record straight (from their perspective) about misinformation that has been shared about them, as well as shed light on the androcentric nature of mainstream knowledge production, particularly that which focuses on social movements and the revolutionary Caribbean.

# Empirical Analysis[[2]](#footnote-2)

## “Babylon: d System of Madness”

Sitting on an ites (red), gold, and green wooden bench in the remote Northern Range of Trinidad for my first chat was deeply symbolic of the social geography and cultural milieu I was in. For what it was worth, the meaning behind ites, gold, and green set the precedent for the days and discussions ahead. Similar to Rastafarians, the Earth People believe “d system” (i.e. colonial-capitalist-liberal modernity) is not only detrimental to, but enslaves life, spirit, and nature (Edmonds 2012). Over the course of my interviews, the tone of the conversations, while good-natured, were distinctively anti-capitalist and anti-colonial. Participants (EP) were adamant in their positions against and quarrels with profit logics, Western worldviews, and imperial structures.

During our first talk, EP stated “slavers put down alotta teachings an tell me that I hada live by allyuh teachings ...to keeps us one way all our lives under ...keep us under poverty.” As EP spoke with a heavy and agitated voice, their eyes drifted off into the distance, anchored in years of contemplation, as if they had not yet come to terms with the reality of the world. This sense of indignant remorse and tensed disenchantment with “the way things are” emerged regularly. Participant rebukes of “d system” and Babylon came early and often, as well as were strident. According to EP, “d system” is representative of the oppression faced by Caribbean people, particularly Black Caribbean people. “These people enslave us,” EP asserted firmly as they pointed to me and stared straight into my eyes. [I thought to myself: “They said ‘*us*.’” Meaning EP was including me as being part of the same group targeted by colonisers­­––which I did feel and identify with.] There was certitude in their eyes. There was no doubt in EP’s mind we were under a spell––haunted as a people.

The stated goal of the Earth People’s resistance was to help the people of Trinidad and Tobago get “free” from the colonial-capitalist mentalities and relationships that were taking a new form post-Independence. For EP, neocolonialism was not only understood from a theoretical standpoint, but from personal experience and intergenerational connection. They spoke of history as if our ancestors were still present. During our conversations, EP often walked loosely or sat at ease, glimpsing away from time to time, to feel the breeze. However, when discussing capitalism and the nature of waged work in the contemporary moment, EP suddenly stared directly and deeply into my eyes: “I don’t want to be no slave again, sister.” The statement was organic and raw. A proclamation loaded with a visceral understanding of Blackness, Caribbean’ness, struggle, dehumanisation, and a will to see the world emancipated and redeemed. EP’s understanding of life is closely tied to the history of the Caribbean people, especially their otherwise free ancestors who were deracinated and yoked in chains for the Middle Passage. Recurrent terms like “dese people” and “dey” apropos European enslavers and colonisers emphasised the distinct separation between the Earth People and their image of “d system”––Babylon.

In reflecting upon the beginnings of their movement, EP noted “Trinidad was hard livin.” As Reddock and Verrest (2004, 4) show, there was a shift in “macro-economic policy away from the Keynesian emphasis on growth with social welfare.” EP suggested life in the 1960-70s was a stressful experience, acutely for young Black people from East Laventille, Morvant. Their time in “d city” was not easy. EP spent most days discontented and in despair, looking for pathways out of alienation. Levels of unemployment at the time rose due to government cutbacks and reallocations. Reddock and Verrest (2004, 4) explain the manifestation of neoliberal austerity in post-independence Trinidad:

The Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, which cutback state expenditure on education, health and social services and today's emphasis on (micro)entrepreneurship and micro-credit as a means of employment and poverty reduction, reflect these neoliberal values.

EP’s awareness of this was reflected in our conversations, evidenced by the sincere frustration they still expressed with Trinidad’s political atmosphere and governance at that time, as well as their refrain about searching from something “different.” A search that soon came to an end one day in Port-of-Spain, 1977.

EP was drawn to the Earth People due to the difficulties they were going through daily. They made it very clear, “When I saw dem (the Earth People) I say, buh daz my livin.” The Earth People made various public appearances in Port-of-Spain’s Woodford Square. A site known as one of deliverance and presentation. In the years leading up to Trinidad and Tobago’s independence, Eric Williams hosted rallies in Woodford Square, colloquially called “The University of Woodford Square” (National Trust 2017), a moniker it still carries. The public space provided the Earth People with a political opportunity. Opposed to people harbouring resentment towards the Trinidadian government at the time yet remaining sedentary, the Earth People acted on their convictions and made a decision to mobilise. The choice to spread their message in Woodford Square––to use public space as a tool against Babylon––was a strategic yet imperilling one.

Many citizens were neither pleased with the manner in which the Earth People presented themselves, nor did they support the brazen tone of the message. The Earth People were oft-naked (or partially covered by burlap sacks) and Mother Earth, as a means subverting bourgeois Christian morals and garnering attention, regularly used obscenities and was referred to as “The Cunt”­­––“the origin of all life.” It was diabolically effective but made authority cross. And while the movement grew to nearly 60 followers on account of the public demonstrations, members were occasionally arrested for public obscenity and disrupting the peace. In some instances, they were detained and diagnosed with psychological disorders.

Despite this, as well as EP’s displeasure with “d system” always being present in their reflections about the disempowerment and silencings they felt in the 1970s, they stated seeing the Earth People in action, *commoning* Woodford Square, lit a fire––igniting them. As Lorde (1984, 42) identifies, “transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation.” EP recalled their self-revelation arriving as soon as they witnessed the Earth People, speaking naked and empowered. EP also testified to feeling “redemption” and never looking back. Upon joining the Earth People’s journey EP stated, “I come to live natural and come to help free my brothers and sisters, my people.” This reflexive drive of needing to escape, be “delivered,” become anew, and inspire others to salvation permeated all of our interviews. It was as though they found a home, a safe haven, and a *place* to rest their head peacefully. EP had zero intention of returning to the life they once lived. And they never did. They said life among the Earth People released them from the chains that were shackling them, mentally and socially.

EP felt joining the Earth People was the best decision they made, with the smile upon their face as they reminisced of times past not fading until conversations returned to the topics of Babylon and slavery. In analysing Independence, EP often spoke of Caribbean people being enslaved twice––once before and now again. “Re-enslavement” presently, however, was not by foreign colonisers, but by the ongoing colonial rationalities and classist relationships permeating the region. Nkrumah (1965, 2) emphasises that “a state in the grip of neocolonialism is not master of its own destiny; it is this factor which makes neocolonialism such a serious threat.” It is as if we (the colonised) have become the colonisers, not by choice, but by not knowing what else to do, or because we consciously choose lifestyles that run counter to the transformative lives we could be living. EP expressed this sentiment by saying, “now redemption come and we want to be enslaving ourself.”

Inequalities that exist within “d system” was a rightfully triggering topic in interviews. “D system,” according to EP, is “what we seeing here, d material livin.” They were of the belief that “d system set up d people to think folly.” In this case, “d system” was/is an active agent in (re)creating, and (re)producing destructive human relations and environmental degradation by influencing the desires of and tempting the masses. When speaking of capitalism, development, and contemporary governance in Trinidad and Tobago, EP continually used the phrase “enslaving ourself” and qualified statements by exclaiming, “it not right.” In speaking of the food system and recognising Trinidad’s dependence upon imports, EP noted Mother Earth once proclaiming: “Well d nation eh have no food! Come lewwe go an plant.” They went on to explain “d system” and material consumerism as premediated enticements that were innately damaging and geared to prey on impressionable minds. The lessons that “d system” teaches are ones of “folly” and “chupidness” (stupidness). EP further explains:

Dis system is goin to done. It finishin every day. It reach it climax. Babylon reach dey climax. Time for babylon to reach off d earth and let life go back to its origin state.

With deep-seated yet steady anger and disconcerted composure, there was resolve in EP’s tenor, alongside solid conviction that there was indeed a silver lining. That is, a belief “d system” will collapse––that capitalism will self-destruct and cannibalise itself. While looking upwards and speaking seemingly directly to the system during one of our interviews, EP attested “you want me to be how you are and dat is d system.” Bignall (2010, 93) states that transformation is generally understood and interpreted through the dominant Western discourse of resistance. The Earth People did not fit the mould and practiced an alternative form of creative defiance, which existed outside of Western narratives and neocolonial officialdom. Their praxis incorporated an antagonistic political-relational orientation towards Babylon whilst maintaining a focus on transcendental liberation and material harmony, which included both conversing against and stripping Babylon off themselves, metaphorically and literally (e.g. clothing).

Foucault (1977, 305), in positing the question: “What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?,” notes that those who deviate from social norms and conventional expectations are often subjected to ostracisation, punishment, and pillory. EP, fiddling with a tree branch and reflecting upon what it meant to marked as deviant, noted: “jus cuz we was different dey wanted to get rid of we... ...whatever...,” shrugging their shoulders at the end of the statement. While blasé in demeanour, the issue of being arrested by Trinidadian police and scorned by normative civil society, for what from their perspective was resistance to systems that enslaved their people, wounded EP. I felt it. They understood that once branded and badged “different, weird, mad, and criminal,” they would never be accepted and severed from connections––even by those who they saw as their own people. According to Marley (1973):

Must be somewhere to be found (must be somewhere for me). Instead of concrete jungle. Where the living is hardest. Concrete jungle. Man, you've got to do your best.

The Trinidadian state, along with the capitalist conformity it demanded and police force it wielded, became an obstinate “concrete jungle” for rogue organisers like the Earth People. Capitalism allows no space for anything or anyone that aims to debilitate it (James, 2001).

As Spivak (1988) and Lorde (1984) suggest, it is not uncommon for grassroots resistance to either be wholly dismissed or brutally suppressed if it does not “speak the language” of the (neo)colonial bourgeoisie and negotiate on the terms and conditions of the ruling elite. This was a common experience for the Earth People and their politics of refusal. That is, the disciplinary and domesticating power of a Westernised capitalist state, which “captures” its populace by setting discursive parameters around respectable ways of being/behaving (e.g. citizenship, rule of law), ultimately ends up monitoring and repressing the lives and existences of those who become its “others” (Foucault, 2003; Mohanty, 2003). This is “madness,” as EP sees it, and constitutes a colonial politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014) they rejected outright. Noting that such a reality carries especially cruel irony given the emergent postcolonial agents of domination are people and brethren who were “othered,” enslaved, and dehumanised in the first place.

The choice of the Earth People to live in seclusion within the remote Matelot forest represented an alternative way of living and was scorned by those who did not understand it. Their practices, teachings, and ideals were ridiculed, viewed as abnormal, and pathologised. Mother Earth was thought “mad” and held captive at St. Ann’s psychiatric ward on more than one occasion. Their emphasis on defying “d system” and returning to nature/nakedness destabilised conformist notions of social order. A social order, from EP’s vantage point, that mirrored the one of colonisers. The Earth People promoted nature “cuz natural is d livin, when Babylon go down, which is d system of things, is back to natural living and ting.” Their belief in the ultimate failure of capitalism and rise of alternative lifestyles, rooted in minimalism and synchronisation, was their lifeblood. Going back to “nature,” from their vantage point, is the only pathway out of “d system” and into salvation.

From an anti-foundationalist frame, the notion of “going back” to “nature” can be interpreted as essentialist and reductive. It also presupposes temporal linearity and spatial homogeneity. Despite this, the Earth People held a holistic and interdependence-oriented definition of nature, flagging its dynamism and co-constitutive interconnectedness with human and non-human animals, as well as plants, earth elements, and the cosmos. EP explains:

D fullness is me and me is dat. I am d water, I am d earth, I is d pawpaw, I is d sun, I’m d moon, I is d star, d rainbow, d lightning, d fire. I am d fullness. U is d fullness. *Life was always*. It eh no mystery.

When questioning EP if they thought this essentialising the natural world, they passionately stated that “dey”/“d system” made them “break that law...that naturalness.” In elaborating, EP intimated that nature is active and kinetic but “d system” that promotes, overconsumption, destruction, inequality, and debt corrals people and makes them break the “law of just living.” The use of the word “law” struck me. I questioned their choice of the term. EP stated it is not a hard-and-fast rule, but that we should be living “just life,” suggesting it was neither a prescribed dogma nor static doctrine. Noting their use of “law” did not signify Heaven as conventional Christianity defined it, which they saw as an imagined figment of “d system.” As EP explained, “Dey fool us. *Ain’t* got *no* kingdom in *no* sky.” The repetition of negatives and disgust on EP’s face showed me their profound disagreement with modernity’s notion of a “white god, black god, no colour god.” They went on to state they saw institutionalised religion as cunning––a deceit, fetish, and form of control that could be escaped through proper enlightenment, which “nature” provides. In explaining that bringing “knowledge to d people” was the goal of the Earth People, EP continued:

I went to d natural living cuz I know is a serious time at hand where humanity’s live...since man break d law and build dis, life never stop workin out, workin it out back to d origin state. It goin to mash up dis system. Back home is Africa there is natural livin, in Australia there’s d Aborigines. It never left the Earth. And daz wa make me know I on d right track.

Their reference to other colonially-targeted groups demonstrates they saw the movement as a relational one, with deep roots and figurative rhizomes. One that was in solidarity and common struggle with other negatively racialised and subordinated communities. EP, in speaking of Mother Earth’s insights, stated:

She see d struggle and jus realise ‘oo gosh d system’ and couldn’t take it no more. Bess we leave dis system, come and lewwe build back we root, our roots livin.

The Earth People believed that autonomy, leaving Babylon behind, and constructing something different is where salvation lay. As alluded to by EP, they were at once prefiguring a new vision of society whilst advocating for a return to non-capitalist ways of living––“like those of our ancestors.”

## Gender Relations and Social Reproduction

It was an exceptionally hot day when I went to visit Cool for our interview. We sat on her front porch in the scorching tropical sun, but the bearing down of the heat soon faded as we began talking. She was a vibrant bundle of joy and spoke freely. As she was the only other woman in the movement, it was imperative that I found Cool as her perspective was unlike any other.

Cool’s story began with a note about her entry point into the movement: “I was only there through mih chirren father.” He visited Cachipa with his friends, Mother Earth’s sons, and Cool asked to go up with him. She was twenty-five at the time. Our conversation later revealed that on a structural level she was critical of colonial-capitalism, and at the quotidian level, enjoyed agrarian life and wanted to live “naturally.” That being said, my research into her acceptance, as well as her account, suggests that she was most likely allowed in because of her relationship with her partner. There were no women in the community prior (aside from Mother Earth), with much speculation and gossip about the group’s refusal to welcome other women. I had many questions, only some of which Cool was able to answer. She shared her understanding of Mother Earth’s worldviews and aims, explaining that Mother Earth had been utterly misrepresented and unfairly made a spectacle in media and literature. Cool’s first point was that Mother Earth was not sure other women would be ready, politically and personally, for life in Cachipa:

Dey couldn’t understand why Jeanette (Mother Earth) was sayin “No.” Some women most woman is not ready for dis life. You doh know. If you say woman eh ready for dis life and you in dis life, wa it is you know? People don’t have dat understanding of to live dat life. Daz what she was tryin to say. It would bring more confusion dan togetherness. She was trying to let dem understand if you could deal with dat.

No one knows with certainty if this was sincere reasoning on the part of Mother Earth, and although it is loaded with potential essentialist tendencies, it is generally accepted as legitimate amongst Earth People affiliates. Cool, shedding light on issues of masculinity and heterosexuality within the movement, went on to forthrightly explain: “Dat an all was an issue, they were young guys. Dem go be horny. Dem go be wanting wives. Remember I was only there through my chirren father.” According to Cool, the restriction of women related to the apparent sexual desires of the men who were a part of the Earth People, and their perceived inability to control their libido. It seems as though women were consciously refused on two fronts, one being the assumed hetero- and hypersexuality of (young) men, with the second being actually-existing issues of hetero-masculinist aggression demonstrated by some men.

Littlewood (1993) explored these issues while he stayed in Cachipa for his ethnography. According to his account, a woman by the name of Mango Rose had gotten to know Mother Earth at St. Ann’s Hospital (both were patients in the psychiatric ward) prior to their move to Cachipa. Mango Rose was also from Laventille, diagnosed by professionals as “unstable,” and subsequently invited into the forests by Mother Earth given she sympathised with those marked “mad.” According to Littlewood (1993), Mango Rose was later run out of the forests due to conflict. She was twenty-three and thought to be a distraction to the young men. Further complicating things, Mango Rose allegedly “bad talked” Mother Earth (attempted to denigrate her character), which interfered with the men’s perceptions of forest life. Littlewood (1993, 213) explained that in one heated conflict “Mango Rose complained she was being ‘run’ and left the house to stand outside the whole night, shouting abuse at Mother Earth.” After this, Littlewood (1993) notes there was speculation that Mother Earth wanted the youth to herself, to either oversee as her own children (even though not all were), or possibly even for sexual reasons. Importantly, no evidence exists one way or the other. So, although there was tension between Mother Earth and Mango Rose, Littlewood’s account reveals Mother Earth’s grievances were not with women in general, but rather, with the interactions that heterosexual men and women have in a context of political resistance.

Mother Earth, too, often complained “to her sons about the vagaries of their father” (Littlewood 1993, 212):

Mother Earth is certainly correct when she says that women have particular problems with abandoning town life and respectability, but she does seem to find it difficult to accept adult women as members, particularly if they appear likely to form liaisons with her male children. While celibacy has no explicit value, Mother Earth strongly hints that the time is not yet come for sexual relations: She complains to her Children about Jakatan’s [sic] sexual approaches towards her.

Mother Earth and Mango Rose’s interaction is not fully understood, but Cool relates that “she [Mango Rose] and Mother Earth had some... ...I can’t tell you d discussion of what happen. I know d girl has her problem.” Whether Mango Rose’s abrupt departure was attributed to personal altercations or a grand narrative that women would “bring trouble” to the movement, Mother Earth had reservations about women joining the group. Besides Mango Rose’s complaints and reported outbursts that distracted the young men, Mother Earth still maintained and reinforced her desire to not welcome women. “This was the most serious disruption the community had experienced from the inside” (Littlewood 1993, 213).

Tafari-Ama (2017) notes the world is described from masculinist points of view with the vast majority of social institutions being male-dominated, which subsequently creates taken-for-granted androcentric “truths.” In turn, unequal gendered power relations work in the service of patriarchal capitalism (Federici, 2012). Men as a class, thusly, are the beneficiaries of these arrangements––whether active or complicit, in agreeance or not. Young (1988, 95) succinctly defines patriarchy as “the coercive power of men to command women’s bodies, labour, and fruits of their labour.” Cool recalls a conversation she had with a male member of the movement:

He tellin me, look how long me and my chirren father in d bush there and I doh have any kids. So that I is not a breeder and in dis life here we living we supposed to have breeders because we need to make chirren. Woman supposed to be breeding and fruitful. Probably if my chirren father shift me I might be more fruitful. Wit dat now I take spell.

This interaction pushed Cool to leave Cachipa and return to Port of Spain to check on her family. A feminist dissection of the interaction above shows how patriarchal entitlements facilitate manipulation and intimidation apropos women’s bodies. Cool was reduced to an object that necessitated penetration and impregnating. Her prescribed singular role in life was to reproduce in order to carry on the population––she was meant to be a “breeder.” Furthermore, Cool was subjected to the imposition of heterosexual masculinity and a man’s self-perceived sexual prowess over her, evidenced by his unsolicited suggestion that he could take Cool from her partner, as if she were property, and get her pregnant. He suggests that she will have a better and more “successful” sexual experience with him. This is not only harassment, but misogynistic.

The Earth People were an anti-systemic movement pursuing freedom under the leadership of a Black/Afro-Caribbean woman. But despite being so, accounts like that of Cool’s begs the question: Will unequal gendered power relations ever be undone? Notably, heteronormative and biologically deterministic understandings vis-á-vis relationships are widespread across the Caribbean, not to mention world writ large. The belief that men “breed” women and need neither support the union nor equitably contribute to socially reproductive labour remains a reality for many women in the region. This, too, is not a far-off concept for the many labouring single mothers and mothering workers who endure a second-shift as a means to make a go of it under patriarchal colonial-capitalism (Barriteau, 2003).

The Earth People were anti-capitalist in many ways, but even in their defiance, restrictive respectability politics and gendered roles emerged. From my conversation with Cool, this was never Mother Earth’s intention. The Earth People lived naked to practice freedom and subvert Babylon. Cool reiterates:

Yuh live naked because yuh find well, yuh want yuh pores to breathe and yuh know, that kinda thing. Yuh hada have that kinda respect. Like yuh mixing and so yuh kinda be kinda eh mixing. But yuh know yuh mixing but still hada wear a lil something. But yuh free yuhself.

According to the Earth People, being naked was a way to admonish and mock “d system” and leave behind the urban industrial consumerist society operating beyond the rural forest. Uncovering one’s body, an act of both corporeal and social exposure, was not only tremendously bold and vulnerablising, but also held deep symbolic meaning to the members. Yet, despite the personal empowerment and political message, at times, the confluence of respectability politics, politesse, and rigid gender expectations presented limits, for the women in particular.

As Lorde (1984) has shown us, women are not born into a world that affords them opportunities to be liberated, educated, free, vibrant, desiring, and human. They are predestined to be, expected to perform, and must behave like a “proper lady” or “woman.” Socially constructed subject positions relationally, often directly, tethered to men. Cool knew what it meant to “free up yuhself and mix” but noted having to cover herself at times for the sake of androcentric decorum or leering eyes. She thereby felt and lived the contradiction and friction of the freedom of living naked yet having to still be “respectful” to men. Part of her dissonance, too, can be attributed to her discomfort with certain men (male gazes) in the movement, as well as because she was the sole (non-exalted) woman. That is, given Mother Earth was the leader, a role that tacitly commanded more deference and respect, Cool stood as the only rank-and-file woman in the group.

Upon exploring the spatiality of social reproduction and aspirant egalitarian gender relations of the Earth People, a great deal of fissures, questions, and inconsistencies emerged. According to Littlefield (1993), Mother Earth was homophobic, incongruously viewing gay and queer people as “unnatural.” Paradox was also the case when it came to the bifurcated work performed in public (forest) versus private (home) spaces. Initially, when I asked about the gendered division of labour with my first group of interviewees, EP explained that the separation (men working in the forest, women working around the home) was a “natural” one. The theme seemed taken-for-granted and EP quickly moved off of the question:

Well yuh know woman was inside and men was outside gatherin goods and ting. Dem use to cook and be inside... ...men used to handle agriculture and woman used to be inside on spirit ting.

When asking Cool about the nature and spaces where women worked, she said women did “nothing really,” aside from, ironically, tidying inside the dwellings, taking care of children, and working/planting. She noted they were “just around.” Littlewood (1993, 195) recorded that “Mother Earth plays with them (the little children) during the day when the men are *at work* in the bush.” The gender relations within the movement, although aimed at being anti-systemic and emancipatory, were reproducing reductive (and in some cases repressive) gender binaries and manifestations of femininity and masculinity. And in one sense, whether consciously or subconsciously, allowing socially reproductive work (e.g. childcare and domestic labour) to go unacknowledged as work. Interestingly, there was no sign of one type of work being explicitly belittled compared to the other, i.e. “women’s work” (although essentialised and closer in proximity to the “home”) was not overtly disparaged compared to men’s labour, which took place “outside in d bush.”

Nevertheless, while in the forest, Cool’s experience was unlike any other. As our conversation continued, the topic of childbirth arose. When speaking about the role of children in the movement and forests I asked who delivered her daughters, she stated: “I mihself. Mih chirren father was there yea.” I was struck by Cool’s matter-of-fact tone because I reflexively assumed childbirth away from hospitals, credentialed doctors, and modern medicine would be a precarious and uncertain process. Cool unassumingly noted that it was a natural human process and her diet, chiefly ochroes, bananas, and pawpaw (that she grew herself), is what assured a smooth delivery. “I wanted a natural delivery. Try to eat tings and nourish mihself.” Mother Earth also had her children in the forest, but Lakatan, her partner, delivered them.

Notably, even despite being in an anti-systemic movement that separated from mainstream society, kinship ties remained vital. Prior to Cool’s delivery, as well as her permanent move to Cachipa, she sought advice and support from mothers within her Port of Spain community. It was important to her to *connect* with them and retrieve information beforehand, given she did not have many women to speak to in Cachipa. She recalled, “When I was goin, I talk to ‘big people.’ Mothers who have chirren, mothers who yuh talk to and change dey whole life.” This camaraderie and consultation is common in Caribbean village life, particularly among women (Hodge, 2002). Cool was so happy to have these women to teach her and love her. She smiled and said “it was good.”

Life in the forest, too, only added to Cool’s already thrilling desire for agriculture. In broaching the topic of social reproduction and living autonomously outside Babylon, Cool noted:

I seein in my head I must be able to survive. I must be able to make a firewood, cook, and survive. I must be able to know how to survive dat even anything, I mustn’t be too panicky. So, it was comfortable for me to experience dat. Planting my food, dat kinda ting.

She took this drive for survival that she learnt from her living in Cachipa and also taught her neighbours how to plant, harvest, and cook. After their first arrest in Matelot, the Earth People were taken to court in Port of Spain. In detailing the event, Cool recollects parlaying the trial experience into an opportunity for mutual aid and cooperative praxis with the urban poor:

I see we went into a yard while in court. I went into a yard, I say I just want to use yuh bathroom. And we become so good friends. I telling dem so allyuh not supposed to be hungry yuh know. I say, look how much yard allyuh have. Allyuh eh supposed to be hungry at all. And I say allyuh could mind fowl. Hear na and in d next two years well I pass and look for that family, is a whole different ting. Nobody lookin sick and hungry.

Here, in attesting to Sharp’s (2009, 75) affirmation that “fieldwork especially can be a very emotional experience,” Cool shared with me a memory that not only personally touched my heart, but, politically, was aligned well with the principles of (anti-capitalist) family farming, agro-ecology, and food sovereignty (Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2010). Cool took initiative to teach others about the Earth People’s notion of resistance and redemption via agriculture and reaping what you sew. A sense of connectedness and mutuality motivated her to share knowledge and see people of “d system” empowered and find ways to survive in it.

Overall, Cool’s experience in the movement was vibrant, enlivening, and efficacious, but also required still operating within the implicit constraints of stereotypical gendered behaviours. My interviews did not reveal highly volatile or explosively violent acts of patriarchal repression or domination, but unequal gendered power relations and experiences of (both perceived and unseen) confinement that were subtle, mundane, and ostensibly banal. It is important to note, again, that the critique being levelled here is not against the Earth People per se, but the oppressive realities made manifest by colonial worldviews, patriarchal-capitalist logics, and heteronormative social relations––all of which continue to disrupt the world, foreclose possible futures, and more alarmingly, seem ordinary.

# Conclusion

Throughout this article we have historicised and investigated the practices and politics of the Earth People as they collectively resisted neocolonialism in post-independent Trinidad and Tobago. The aim of the piece is to contribute to feminist, postcolonial, and Caribbean scholarship by offering an account of the movement’s uncharted and peripheralised experience. One that has gone academically undocumented locally and been misrepresented globally. On this front, Author1’s archival explorations revealed the androcentric nature of both mainstream media coverage and academic literature (Gilmore, 2002; Pulido, 2002). The Earth People, bearing in mind it was an agrarian movement led by a woman, was neither well-documented nor publicised. This limited and skewed reporting in the historical record not only diminishes women who lead and are on the frontlines of political struggles, but also carries a legacy of consequences and raises questions. Who is emblematic of a Caribbean anti-colonial revolutionary? Who is given credit for inciting and inspiring resistance in the region? And just who do we picture, first, when we think of radical Caribbean thought, action, and struggles for liberation? Unbalanced reporting and archival omissions re-instantiate misguided and incomplete histories of gender and revolution (i.e. social transformation), thereby making it seem “obvious,” “natural,” and “normal” that men will be at the vanguard of change. This is a fiction that relegates women, particularly women of colour and Indigenous women, to history’s background, side-lines, and footnotes––as well as narrows minds and forecloses possibilities.

As the fieldwork portion of our research took shape, we were principally interested in what the gender relations of the movement entailed, primarily because it advanced under the leadership of a woman, Mother Earth. We anticipated novelty regarding women’s roles, positions, and participation. With all forms of resistance, however, surprises, complexities, and ironies arise. Some anticipated, others completely unexpected. Indeed, in social movements, research, and life––anything is possible––especially paradox. We were struck to discover that only two women were in the group for what are beclouded and intimately complex reasons beyond any of our full, as well as any one individual’s, comprehension. It goes without saying that Mother Earth was influenced, mobilised, and led based upon her experiences as a Black/Afro-Caribbean woman stigmatised as “mad.” Her decisions, too, were shaped and affected by the interactions she had with the entitled men and institutionalised authority figures she encountered throughout her life––as are any woman’s. And despite being egalitarian and “nature”-based in principle, many of the gendered spaces and practices of work created within the movement, although neither abusively patriarchal nor necessarily devalued, were essentialist and bifurcated. The Earth People also reproduced some of the orthodox dualisms and heteronormative oppressions that the society outside the Cachipa forests they were rebelling against maintained. This is further evidence of just how difficult it is to undo deterministic gender binaries and entrenched opinions about sexuality, no matter where one is in the world.

In sum, the Earth People’s anti-colonial, separatist, and anti-capitalist leanings were undeniably a product of the social, political, and historical Caribbean context they were in. As EP stated on numerous occasions, “d system was built on lies, illusion, and confusion” and “d livin was hard.” As Cool affirmed: “We done against d oppression.” These are shrewd indictments of the threats to life posed by patriarchal colonialism and racial capitalism. Accordingly, in the face of Babylon, the Earth People tried to build something different––something better for people in the Caribbean. Whilst the group’s worldviews, political ideals, and expressions of collective resistance were not taken up widely within either Trinbagonian society or across the region as whole, their story and members’ perspectives still matter. They are as much threads in the vibrant tapestry that constitutes Caribbean political history, culture, and life, as they are instructive about the complexities that exist amongst the region’s social movements and gendered power relations.

And even though the Earth People intended to practice autonomy, egalitarian social relations, emancipatory politics, and effect just change––our findings prompt us to trouble the term egalitarian, to query what emancipation actually looks like, and to ask two pressing questions concerning autonomy and transformation, which are expressly exigent for the context from which we write, the Caribbean. First, empirically, how are emancipatory politics and egalitarian social relations defined, practiced, and measured? And second, when we resist “d system,” what is being resisted and (re)produced, and how? These are the queries that emerge at the nexus of gender, power, resistance, and struggles for self-determination in the region. To end, despite the questions and paradoxes that remain, what we do know is that the Earth People––in their attempt to defy Babylon––had a woman at the helm. This is remarkable. And whilst we are not arguing their movement was perfect, we have provided a story for posterity of how they, as political actors in and a part of the Caribbean, confronted an oppressive reality to seek control of what rightfully belonged to them––freedom.

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1. We are not using “mad” and “madness” uncritically and recognise their ableist repercussions. Notably, the power-laden terms were wielded by both state-sanctioned authorities and normative society against the Earth People, who, incidentally, described colonialism and capitalism as “madness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Given that Author1 conducted the fieldwork and knows Trini-Creole, we are foregrounding her/her voice throughout the narrative analysis. In respecting participant requests to speak as a collective subject, we have assigned all the alias “EP” and will be using the epicene referent “their” and “they” throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)