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**Socializing A Nation's Youth: The Influences of  
American Cable Television in Dominica**

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**Abstract**

Scholars of the English-speaking Caribbean have long pointed to key gender differences between the sexes. Masculinity is measured by a man's virility, his fathering of multiple children by different women, and his ability to financially provide for these women and their children. Fulfilling the female role includes managing domestic duties, raising children, working outside of the home, and attending church. All of these gendered aspects of daily life are prevalent in the small, rural, highly religious community of Morne Lush, Dominica. While such gender roles and divides have been well documented in the West Indies, less discussion exists of how masculinity and femininity are currently being redefined due to the effects of foreign television programs.

This paper contributes to the social science literature on culture change, the effects of television, and gender constructions in the Caribbean. The growing pains of a nation are analyzed throughout the paper.

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The title of my talk today is: 'Socializing a Nation's Youth: The Influences of American Cable Television in Dominica.' It is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in a village with the pseudonym of Morne Lush, in the Commonwealth of Dominica, West Indies from August 2001 until September 2002.

The central question of my field research was to find out how female household heads used social support networks to cope with economic difficulties. My talk today has a narrower focus. While carrying out my research, I found that Dominicans had a lot to say about how

swiftly their society had changed from when they were growing up. These changes included differences in favorite pastimes, foods, clothing choices, and manners.

My informants ranged in age from their early 20s to their early 70s. My research project focused specifically on the lives of single mothers, and because of this, the viewpoints expressed are from their perspective, not that of the younger people, aged 20 and under, about whom they spoke.

My paper concerns the connection between media, in this case television, specifically North American cable programs, and perceived changes in the social climate in Dominica. These changes include, first, a shift in the expectations and values of the younger generation specifically in relation to career and lifestyle choices, second, a growing concern over the Americanization of Dominica, and third, the perception by adults of a negative shift in young people's behavior, dress, and attitudes.

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Morne Lush is a mountaintop village, which has 592 residents and is located approximately 15 minutes from Dominica's capital, Roseau. The most common occupation in the community is small-scale farming. My census showed that of the 333 adults aged 18 or above living in the village, 41 percent named farming or gardening as their primary or secondary occupation. Most villagers maintain gardens both to feed their families and to produce an income from the market. Many of the female household heads that I interviewed sell their produce directly in the weekly market held in the capital or to hucksters, who resell the goods at the market or in neighboring West Indian islands.

During my field research, I worked as the substitute village preschool teacher. I also attended weekly parenting meetings held at the village's primary school beginning in October 2001 and running through April of 2002. It was at these parenting meetings in particular, as well as during individual interviews, time spent in people's homes, and at local events, that I became aware of how strongly these women – and adult men – felt that daily life in Dominica had drastically changed over the past 10 to 20 years and that their children's lives were quite different from how their own lives had been growing up.

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What has brought about all of these changes? Clearly a multitude of factors have contributed to the real and perceived changes in customs and lifestyle in Dominica, but today, I am going to focus on one important factor that has had reverberating effects not just in Dominica, but in many nations worldwide. That factor is the spread of ideas and information through television.

Television was introduced to Morne Lush in the late 1980s and at first, only one family owned a set. Villagers remember gathering together in the owner's home to watch the set or peering through the window to catch a glimpse of the screen. Today, many villagers own television sets or go to a nearby relative's home to watch programs. Island-wide, 50 percent of homes have a television set, according to the 1991 census. Not owning a television set was used as an indicator of poverty in the 1991 census. According to the British Development

Division's Poverty Assessment study of Dominica (1996), the decision to use television set ownership as an indicator of poverty in the 1991 census was controversial. The report stated, significantly: 'The rationale behind its inclusion was that television has become a very important part of the social fabric of Dominica and that people felt deprived if they were unable to watch cricket, see the Prime Minister or watch the soaps in their homes' (p. 37).

\* \* \*

So how has television affected life in Dominica? As I stated earlier, television has made itself felt in three significant ways. First, there has been a shift in certain individual expectations and values. Lennox Honychurch, a Dominican historian and anthropologist, explained during an interview that the generation gap between adults and their children has been widened since the introduction of cable television to the island in 1983. 'Traditional village life,' he said, 'centers on subsistence and market gardening.' New expectations and attitudes brought about by foreign television programs have caused young villagers to become disconnected from the land, which remains a major source of financial support for their parents. Crispin Sorhaindo, the former president of Dominica, relayed the same message. When asked about cable television, he responded:

That's a problem. The whole country is in a mess because of this. The values have changed rapidly . . . And people themselves have grown, they've got now . . . and therefore they no longer need to go to church, God is no longer important in their lives, partying, going to Roseau and doing what the Roseau people do . . . dress, entertainment, [it] is now American standards . . . And now the country people are no longer the country people that we knew as gentle folk who were willing to live a simple life, life is now complicated . . . The values have gone up, the expectations have been raised considerably and the income is not adequate to meet those expectations. So we develop a frustration. That is the problem. So there has been some deterioration and one would say it's because of the outside influence.

The comments of both Dr. Honychurch and former President Sorhaindo highlight several conflicts in values that elites perceive between the younger generation of Dominicans and their parents. An emphasis on material goods and lifestyle choices without the means to obtain such goods is one inconsistency. In addition, the consumerism promoted by North American television programming is at odds with a lifestyle centered on farming and church attendance. It would be consistent with city life, white-collar jobs, and entertainment derived from drinking alcoholic beverages. The portrayal of glamorous urban lifestyles is one of the many factors that may make the prospect of farming less than enchanting for many young people.

In a study of television's effects on two rural villages in India, Kirk Johnson (2000: 214) concluded:

Television programs, which most often portray urban rather than rural ways of living that glamorize consumerism and paint a picture of social mobility and achievement, have influenced many villagers, especially the young into rejecting rural and agricultural life for alternative ways of living . . . Few young people today hope to do what their fathers and grandfathers did for a living.

Johnson's description of social change in rural India appears to coincide with Dr. Honychurch's and former President Sorhaindo's description of what is occurring with Dominican youth.

A cursory analysis of census data I gathered, however, shows that of the 65 village youth between the ages of 18 and 25-years-old, 25 percent named gardening or farming as their current occupation. That percentage does not equal the 41 percent of overall villagers who named gardening as their primary or secondary occupation, but it still represents a substantial proportion of young people. Although I would need to conduct focused interviews with young villagers to discuss their current occupations and their career ambitions to determine what role, if any, television plays in their aspirations, several facts are well known. A generation gap exists between younger and older Dominicans. This gap has been widened not only because of the emergence of television, but also based on dissimilar educational opportunities. The younger generation of Dominicans is more educated than their elders. The majority of my adult informants completed only primary school and never thought about other ways of making a living than farming. Their children, many of whom have finished or plan to complete secondary school, should have more options available to them. Unfortunately, a lack of available jobs locally often leads to frustration among many youth and sometimes migration from the island.

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In addition to a shift in individual expectations and values, television has caused distress about the Americanization of Dominica. Non-governmental organizations, Caribbean scholars, and the general public have all voiced their concerns about this. A 1997 study by the Dominican National Council of Women warned that Dominica's cultural identity is slowly becoming contaminated by alien values, most of them coming from America. My informants articulated similar concerns. A 34-year-old domestic servant succinctly summarized changes in local practices attributed to American television programming:

I don't blame TV for anything, although the TV have a lot of influence on us – what we eat, what we wear, the places we go, the things we do. The TV influencing everything we do. Our culture's changing from what it was to the American culture. We want to dress like the Americans, we want to eat what they eat, TV dinners [we] want to buy, everybody wants to pick something out fast and put it in the microwave. People don't want fig and dasheen anymore, it's macaroni and cheese, spaghetti . . . you know, that's what they eat – fast food. That's what we want to eat. Not because it's better, because it's easier, it's faster.

The shift in local preferences evident in her statement underscores the desire of Dominicans to have material wealth to buy the luxury goods, such as microwaves, which few locals can afford, to be able to imitate their North American peers. Likewise, local dishes – fig and dasheen – are rejected in favor of foreign dishes.

A study of gender socialization in the Caribbean conducted by Brown and Chevannes in 1998, found that in all three of the nations where their investigations took place - Dominica, Jamaica, and Guyana - West Indian parents were highly concerned about the Westernization

of local values. Parents complained that rampant materialism and competitive lifestyles were eroding traditional values and moral models of behavior. Parents worried that their children were being too exposed to sex and violence. Brown and Chevannes point out that the media in general, but television in particular, negatively affect traditional West Indian gender roles by broadcasting non-traditional images, such as those of sex and violence, that conflict with traditional religious values. American television messages appear to be in conflict with West Indian morals and food choices.

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Finally, in addition to unease about the Americanization of the island, there is a concern over young people's behavior, dress, language, and attitudes. Adults in Morne Lush were disturbed by the images of sexuality and violence that fill many scenes in American television programs. In particular, the television station BET (Black Entertainment Television) was blamed for many perceived social ills. BET broadcasts numerous music videos featuring African American rap and hip hop artists dressed in revealing clothing, driving expensive cars, wearing thick gold chains, and engaged in lifestyles that center on violence and sexuality.

My informants often complained that teenage clothing choices and behavior were modeled after programming shown on BET. Such images of scantily clad men and women violated the standards of daily village life. The 37-year-old woman who headed the village's political council commented: '[C]hildren want to mimic what they see on BET: the dress, the language, the gestures. This is difficult for the parents.' A male taxi cab driver in his 30s said: 'BET sets a bad example for Dominicans and for black people in general with its images of half-naked men and women. The station brings viewers down instead of lifting them up.' A 31-year-old salesclerk and mother of two teenage daughters and a 45-year-old nurse and mother of an adolescent boy and girl both deplored the way their children copied the dress, actions, and language seen and heard on BET. The station was blamed for a wet t-shirt contest being held at a well-attended beach party on a national holiday by a tour guide in his 20s. These comments reflect a widespread concern over the Americanization of the island's youth.

There were different complaints about American television's effects on boys and girls. Most of the mothers in the parenting classes I attended said that Dominican girls were dressing too provocatively by revealing too much of their bodies, certainly when compared with the modest dress that they were required to wear when growing up. Girls' new style of dress was linked in their minds to an open display of sexuality, which is looked down upon and discouraged by many of these Christian mothers. These findings again echo Johnson's findings in rural India (2000) where older men often commented that women shown on satellite television dressed shamelessly.

Dominican boys' emulation of American rap artists' style of dress with pants worn low and boxer shorts exposed was also condemned by mothers although much less frequently than was girls' attire. These mothers worried not so much about clothing styles, but young men imitating television actors or musicians by bringing bottles and knives to secondary school or by selling drugs. The difference in levels of concern regarding television's effects on male versus female clothing choices is not particularly surprising. Scholars have found in many

West Indian nations including Nevis (Fog Olwig 1993), Jamaica (Clarke 1957), and Montserrat (Rubenstein 1987) that adults worry about protecting young West Indian women from male sexual advances. Focusing on the modesty of adolescent girls' clothing choices is a natural offshoot of this concern.

Television is also blamed for new modes of youth behavior. A 31-year old male village councilor and a 31-year-old female sales clerk both asserted that television shows had inserted new thoughts into children's minds: young boys and girls could no longer be trusted to interact alone in an innocent manner. The male councilor said:

When I was small, I didn't know about television and whatnot. I used to go to school and . . . a whole set of us, we friends. We used to play, play ring games and so on . . . And you find it was no corruption . . . But today it change so much that a little boy cannot even talk to a little girl because they figure since they're talking, it's something. Especially to do with sex or whatever. Right now, children not playing again . . . [D]uring growing up, we didn't even used to think of girls. We used to have girls as friends, it was just friends, as if we didn't know about sex. When I was going to school, I didn't know about kissing girls. True. When television started coming on stream, you just see people kissing on television and whatever, so it just change everything. Now dating in Dominica is messed up.

The female salesclerk said that young boys were in the habit of touching young girls 'in the wrong place' and that children's minds had changed from what they were when she was growing up. She felt young people watch too much television and they get exposed to too many unseemly ideas. Television is seen as robbing children's innocence and sexualizing them too early.

Television is blamed not only for a perceived increase in children's sexuality, but also for a nationwide increase in violence. During a press conference held after a particularly violent Carnival celebration in 2002, the Prime Minister of Dominica stated that violence was proliferating among both children and adults; he blamed the American media. He encouraged parents to censor the programs their children watch to stop the 'values vacuum,' which was at the heart of Dominica's social problems. He pleaded with Dominicans to not allow the media to 'dictate our children's values systems and distort their moral judgments.' Similar arguments about the effects of viewing violent images on television have been voiced worldwide.

The question of who or what agents are socializing a nation's youth – parents or television programs- is obviously oversimplified: many forces contribute to a child's socialization. Yet, the very real conflicts brought about by the popularity of foreign television programs that have only been widely broadcast in Morne Lush for the past ten years, appear to be a source of social strain and therefore a potential trigger for societal change. It will be many years before the long term effects of foreign mass media can be fully understood. For now, suffice it to say, a number of different sources in Dominica, from parents, to the Prime Minister, from non-governmental organizations to people on the street are voicing their anxieties about the new career aspirations, external values, behavior, dress, and so on that are taking hold of the nation's youth and they are blaming North American television programs for these changes.

Of course, people complain about the effects of television in many places. It could easily be argued that what is occurring in Dominica is seen in many nations and is therefore, not particularly interesting. When I was pondering how to contribute to a discussion of West Indian gender roles for this conference, my informants' frequent remarks about children's dress kept echoing in my mind. The complaint that viewing television was sexualizing children and the fact that television's emergence in Morne Lush was so recent, also interested me. It seemed clear that something significant was occurring. My goal today was not to present something necessarily innovative or unique to Dominica, but rather to begin exploring ideas important to my informants, so that I can begin to try and understand processes of social change and continuity on the island.

Two large and obvious questions remain. Are these changes in fact taking place and are my informants correct when they blame American television programs? It is, of course, impossible to answer these questions conclusively without conducting a long term study of Dominican life before the arrival of television through today. It could also be the case that American television programming is being used as a scapegoat for Dominican cultural change when in fact those changes have other and more fundamental causes.

Certainly some aspects of my informants' stories appear to be exaggerated. While Dominicans complain of the Americanization of the island and cite as evidence the rejection of local foods, such as figs and dasheen, my observations showed that local delicacies are still consumed widely. Yes, villagers enjoyed eating pasta, but many could not afford such overpriced goods and continued to feed their families root crops and bananas that have sustained Dominicans for centuries.

Second, while mothers lamented how skimpily their young daughters dressed and blamed their clothing choices on BET, it seemed clear to me that village girls dressed themselves quite respectably and modestly, in comparison to other West Indian islands I visited.

Times may have changed in Dominica, but it has in no way become a miniature United States. Young Dominicans cannot emulate the glamorous urban lifestyle shown on television. They live in a beautiful country that has few of the entertainment options, career choices or access to luxury goods that many Americans are privy to. The Americanization that many Dominicans fear is a far cry from what is happening on the ground.

Several questions remain to be considered in understanding the transformations occurring in Dominica. Which claims made by villagers, government officials, and others are accurate and which are not? Are children actually becoming more sexual and violent in comparison to previous generations, or, instead, is this a case of each generation claiming stark differences from the next generation, when they actually do not exist? How are different forces, such as the church, the nation's faltering economy, or other offshoots of globalization contributing to whatever social changes are occurring on the island? Is television merely a scapegoat for a growing state of dissatisfaction with Dominican life in general? These questions should serve as a starting point for further consideration and discussion.

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