'Strange Love' in Intersubjective Spaces:
Untangling the Relational Motif in Ethnographic Research with
Disadvantaged Children in Kingston Jamaica

Nicole D'souza (PhD candidate)
Division of Social & Transcultural Psychiatry
McGill University
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Source: Nicole D'souza, Dream-A-World stage performance

The data in this presentation stems from ethnographic research that I conducted in Kingston Jamaica between 2014 and 2016. The aim of my research was to capture local understandings of wellbeing and resilience of children living in inner-city communities in Kingston. I describe how a group of children living in a community I call Orange Tree, negotiate their daily lives and tensions in a social context characterized by high levels of interpersonal conflict, violent crimes, and turf wars.

Framed in a constructivist tradition, I use a child-focused ethnography, which adopts an ethos of participatory research in order to understand the multiple relationships children share with their peers, family, authority figures and the larger society. While the project was not conceived as a community based participatory research project, the main benefit of adopting participatory methodologies in this ethnography was to have children's perspectives and experiences heard, positioning them as actors of their own worlds, rather than subjects or objects of research.

Source: CARIMENSA, Grand Challenges Canada

My first encounters with the children from Orange Tree was in June 2014 when I was invited to conduct some ethnographic work for a Grand Challenges Canada funded project that was being piloted by researchers from the Caribbean Institute of Mental Health and Substance Abuse (CARIMENSA), McGill University, and the Jamaican Ministry of Education. The piloted intervention was aimed at 9-year old children in four inner-city communities of Kingston who were deemed by teachers to be of "future high risk" of developing problems such as school dropout, crime, early pregnancy, and gang violence. The project was called Dream-A-World (DAW) and it used a child-focused model of intervention concentrating on music, art, drama, dance and academic tutoring to bring about positive behaviour change. In the summer months it took the formation of a summer camp, with an intensive 3- week session, followed by top-up sessions throughout the school year. The program was implemented for a span of 2.5 years from grade 4 until the children reached their final grade 6 year of primary school. My role was to help the research team collect ethnographic data that would not only allow them to document the intervention process, but would allow them to further understand the ways in which children make meaning and act as agents in mediating forces between violence and its impact.

Fieldwork in Kingston, Jamaica
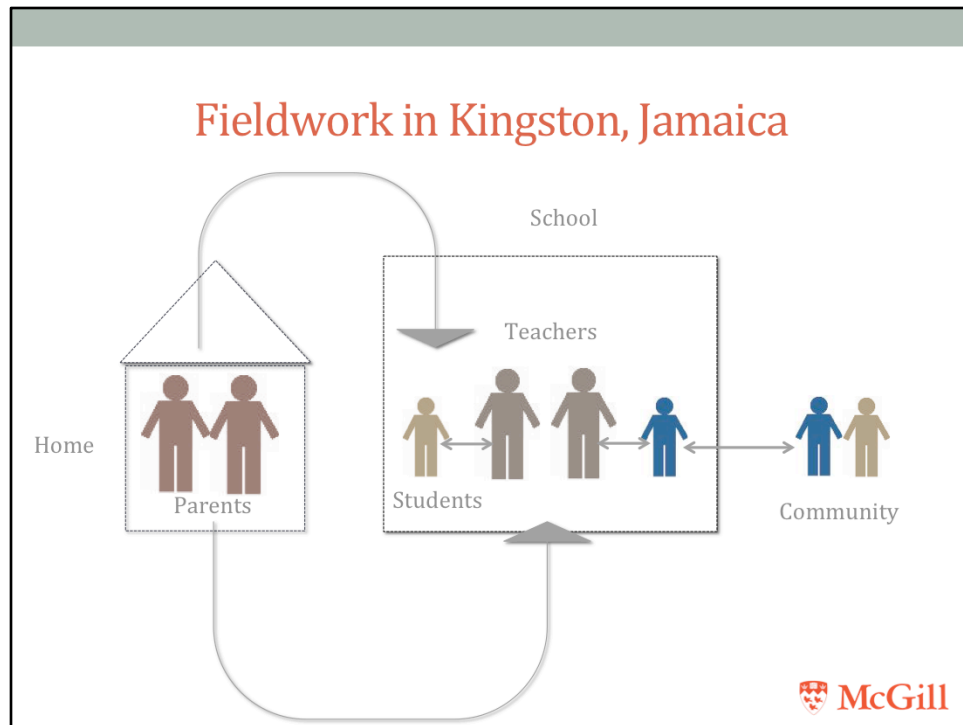
My research is informed by 7.5 months of fieldwork in one of the four schools taking part in the GCC study.

The school became the focal point of my fieldwork since the children spent the majority of their day in the school compound, allowing me to use it as a main site for observing child socialization practices. Following IRB approval from the ethics committees at McGill and UWI, I gained approval to work in Orange Tree Primary from the school's principal.
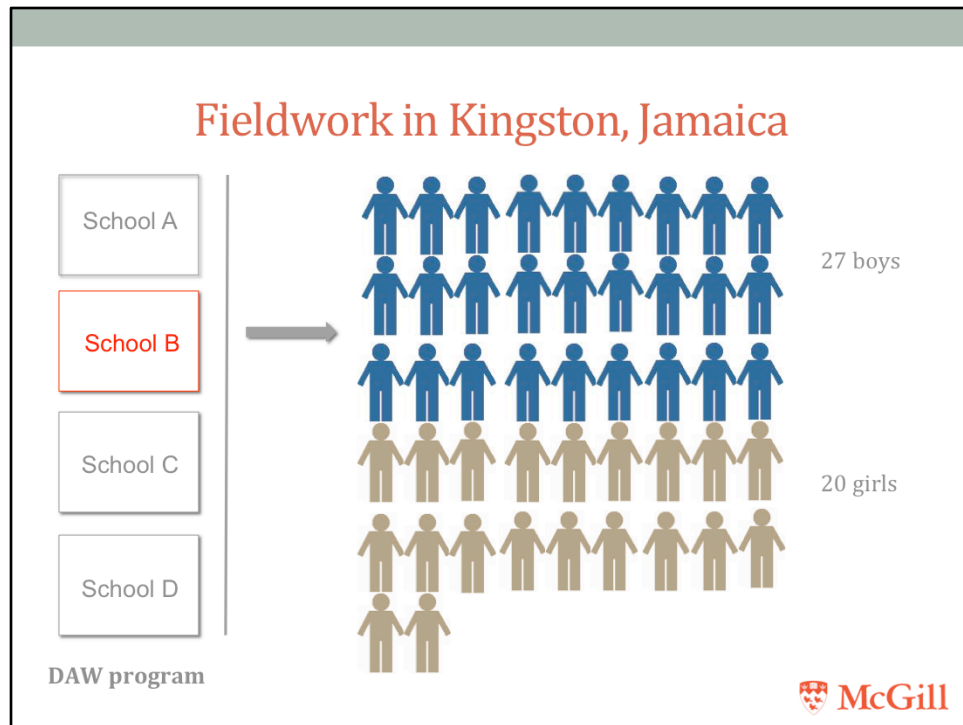
I recruited children, aged 10-11 years old, who were participating in the larger DAW study. Through purposive sampling, children were recruited from both the control and intervention groups and then placed into smaller same-sex working groups.
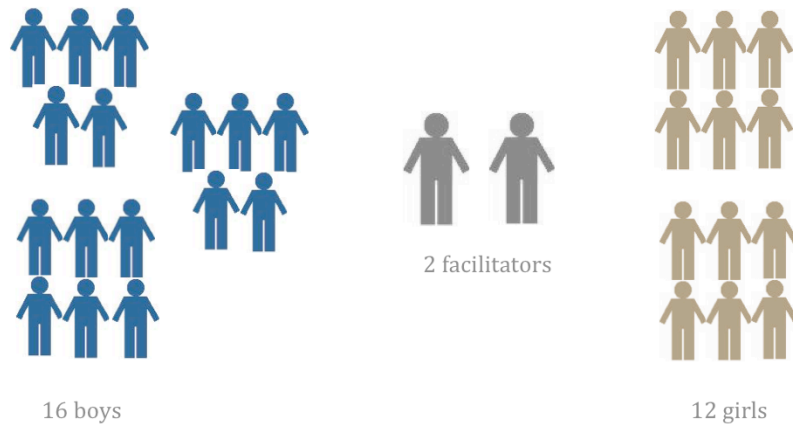
We established same-sex research groups to create a space where children could talk about sensitive topics. Each group consisted of 5-6 children, with a total of 28 child participants. Each group had a total of 5 sessions that were approximately 2 hours each, over the course of one month. In total I conducted 25 group interview sessions.

Methods

During the group sessions, we used art based methods such as drawing, body mapping, and role-paying in combination with interviews and other techniques such as spatial mapping to construct a space in which discourses could be debated and contested, and critiques of various topics took place.

In addition to the group sessions, my fieldwork drew on participant observations, detailed ethnographic notes I took on students' activities inside and outside Orange Tree Primary School, as well as in-depth interviews with teachers, parents and community members

The data I will present in my manuscript today stems form the group interviews, so I will only focus on those interviews for the remainder of the presentation.

'Strange Love' In Intersubjective Spaces

- A focus on the intersubjective and relational aspects of conducting research with children
- Empirical reflections of the intersubjective space that unfolds in relation to my perception of the children, but also the children's perception of me, the researcher, ushered through the lens of the soap opera, *Strange Love*:
  - the events that shape the direction of the inquiry
  - the productive discomfort and epiphanies of the field encounter
  - the interpersonal dynamics that affect the outcomes of the research.

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'Strange Love' In Intersubjective Spaces

- Preoccupation with the concepts of empowerment and 'giving-voice', at the expense of insufficient reflexive awareness of the researcher's role in the process
  - Much to be understood about the implicit emotional and interpersonal aspects of the researcher/researched relationship

- What happens within the observer must be made known, if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood (Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*)

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The Epistemology of the Hyphen

- Granek (2013) calls the space between the researcher and the participant the "epistemology of the hyphen" and argues that it is rooted in our intersubjectivity.

- Kelly Oliver (2001) "theory of witnessing"
  - self/other split is an illusion and that all subjectivity is born out of a process of witnessing and co-construction

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Fieldwork in Kingston, Jamaica

Sugar cane cutters in Jamaica. Photograph: Alamy, Source: The Guardian, UK

Indentured Indian laborers. Source: National Library of Jamaica

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My situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) as an immigrant, Indo-Canadian, adult researcher prompted a reflection on what power I would have in relationships with my young participants in Kingston, Jamaica. How would Jamaica's post-colonial history affect my relationship with the children? I use the term ''postcolonial'' to refer to a previously colonized space that is now technically independent. While Jamaica is officially decolonized, it has come to be characterized by a new imperialism (Harvey, 2003; Tikly, 2004) shaped by the economic, political, and cultural hegemony of the West within the context of globalization (Tikly & Bond, 2013). Therefore, would I as the researcher represents not only a colonial past but also a neocolonial present?

The history of Indians in Jamaica is extensive and is tied to the period of indentureship on the island between 1845 and 1916. Following the abolition of slavery in the country in the 1830s, the Jamaican Government turned to India for indentured labourers to work in the plantation colonies. Many Indians agreed to become indentured labourers to escape the widespread poverty and famine of the 19th century. After 70 years of working in Jamaica, 53 per cent of Indians who arrived, remained. Many left the plantations for Kingston and took jobs that used skills they brought with them and others they acquired (ref).

Fieldwork in Kingston, Jamaica

- Population of around 650,000 people
- One fifth of country's population

Kingston

Jamaica Social Development Commission, 2008

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My fieldwork took place in the Kingston Metropolitan Area, one of Jamaica's more populated regions. With a population of around 650,000 people, Kingston accounts for about one fifth of the country's population. In many parts of Southern and Western Kingston rapid rural-urban migration and lack of effective urban planning has led to the emergence of numerous informal settlements with poor quality housing and service provision.

Fieldwork in Kingston, Jamaica

"Uptown"

"Downtown"

Garrison community, like that of Orange Tree

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The community of Orange Tree, with an estimated population of close to 10,000 residents emerged as an informal settlement in West Kingston in the 1950s before turning into a government scheme in the 1960s. In Jamaica, the word "scheme" is used as slang to refer to urban areas of government subsidized housing developments- or housing schemes- that had been set-aside for generally low-income citizens. Due to the combination of low-income, high crime factors, the idea of the scheme has come to represent a demarcated physical and symbolic space that defines its inhabitants as socio-economically "other"(ref). Thirty to forty-five percent of Kingston's population lives in these urbanized, overcrowded "Downtown" inner-city schemes or ghettos, and it can be concluded that the majority of those who are contained within those structures are black/African Jamaicans (Howard, 2005). In comparison, residential areas of the wealthier class, mainly made up of lighter-skinned brown Jamaicans of mixed or ethnic minority descent (e.g., Chinese, Indian, European, Arab), are spatially concentrated in "Uptown" Kingston (C. Clarke, 2006), while owning most of the business downtown. In downtown Kingston, Indian and Chinese residents own shops, bazaars, and restaurants—of which black Jamaicans are employees.

Thus, the idea of "Downtown" and "Uptown" as terms no longer simply refer to geographic spaces, but have taken on inherent social, political and cultural meanings. This socio-geographic distance that separates the ghettos and garrisons of

'Strange Love' in Orange Tree

Strange Love (*Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon*)

So returning to Orange Tree and my research with the children. An intersubjective space arose in the participatory group sessions, when the children began using a popular Indian soap opera called *Strange Love* (*Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon*) to negotiate my positionality, and in doing so, also speak about their lived realities. The group interviews became an emotional experience of both interpersonal relations and relations to culture and society. A liminal "third space" was created through the soap opera, where our experiences, emotions and fantasies were exchanged across boundaries and involved deep participation in co-constructing each other (Crapanzano, 2006; Diamond & Allcorn, 2009).

The Hindi soap opera *Strange Love* was one of two Indian melodramas that were introduced to Jamaican television in 2015, around the same time of my second round of fieldwork in Orange Tree. The show premiered in India in 2011, was purchased by a local Jamaican channel, dubbed into English and played back-to-back Monday through Friday, with reruns of the week's episodes playing on the weekends. While media studies have suggested that soap operas usually have a predominantly female following, in Jamaica, it seemed both, men and women, as well as children watched Strange Love with interest. A Jamaican columnist writing for a popular local newspaper, described the country's obsession with the soap opera based on her encounter with "tough looking men" at Kingston's shipping port, who on their lunchtime were watching the melodrama "with the helpless concentration of snakes

'Strange Love' in Orange Tree

David: "Miss do you watch *Strange Love?* Did you
            see it yesterday?

Nicole: "No, what's that?"

Jamal: "It's a show"

David: "you know Khushi from Strange Love... you
            are Khushi!"

The group of boys irrupted into laughter, agreeing with his comment

Regie: "a tru yuh know... a Khushi dat fo' real"
                        [*she really is Kushi*].

The focus group sessions were scheduled in the afternoon hours in the summer break, and the children constantly reminded me that they were missing their favourite show to attend the group sessions. My research assistant JoJo, was also enamoured with the show and would often gossip with the children about characters and plot twists before the group sessions started. In our group discussions, the children often used examples from *Strange Love* as anchoring points to talk indirectly about their own attitudes and behaviours about social issues, interpersonal relationships, romantic and family problems.

For the children, the soap opera was filled with drama and the daily goings of the characters, and the situations the characters found themselves in, was different, yet so similar to the lives of the children. The melodramatic script of the show produced a narrative that was loosely defined and delimited and was able to be created and recreated collectively.

'Strange Love' in Orange Tree

Shayene:	"Miss you looked prettier when your hair was longer"
Denise:	"Yes, when you were here last time, your hair was long and nice"
Shayene:	"Have you ever had your hair as long as Khushi?"
Nicole:	"No, the longest it has been is up to my shoulders"
Kaydene:	"You should grow it like Khushi, her hair is pretty"
Patricia:	"Yea, why you cut yuh hair, you know you coulda sell it a town. Dem have weaves there from Brazil and India."
Patricia:	"Next time you cut your hair, you must save me a piece"

In the first few days of the group interviews, many of the planned activities for the sessions had to be re-oriented, as the children re-defined the topics of their interest to be covered in the session based on conversations stemming from the soap opera, and based on my interaction with them. For example, on the morning of the first group session, I was preparing a topic on "The Important People in My Life", a drawing activity that stemmed from a previous conversation with the children in which they identified that social support was an important element in their development. The activity was meant to facilitate discussions with the children about the people and social networks in their lives that contributed to their wellbeing. However, while setting up the activity, some of the girls from the group came over to the table to chat and catch-up on the past 6 months that had gone by since my last visit. Amidst conversations about school, younger siblings and home life, the focused soon turned towards their discontent with my new haircut

'Strange Love' in Orange Tree

Conversations about Khushi's hair and my hair opened up a space where casual conversations could be turned into more structured discussions on topics of particular interest to the children (Punch 2001). Conversations about my hair turned into conversations about beauty standards in Orange Tree, which turned into mythical stories about mermaids who had the power to make you loose all your hair if you used their hairbrush, and then returned to conversations about the children's own hair and how they were judged on being 'good' or 'bad' based on the upkeep of their hair. Shifting dialogues in this space also ensured that, as Leyshon (2002) points out, the children recognized that they maintained a certain degree of power in their interaction with me.

Yet, the management of potential power imbalances between the children and myself was not as simple as allowing the children to maintain control over the discussions. The complexity of the multi-dimensional and dynamic 'space between' the children and myself was also mediated by differences in our race and ethnicity, which at times produced an awkward discomfort on my part, when the children negotiated my identity and incorporated their ideas of my power and privilege in relation to themselves.

What became common in the group interviews were the ways in which locally embedded discourses about race and class were sorted and re-sorted based on our joint reflections of the soap opera, the children's experience of local life, and their perceptions of my positionality. Let me provide an example illustrative of such a situation:

What emerged from this conversation was the way in which the children positioned me, vis-à-vis the characters of *Strange Love* to negotiate my positionality as a foreign outsider. Their semiotic use of the word "Uptown" when contrasted with "Downtown" underscores a series of associations that reinforce borders and boundaries allied with dichotomized and longstanding racialized notions of inferiority and superiority in the country. Uptown implies affluence, education, capital- both culturally and otherwise- whereas downtown does not. The color/class divide in Jamaican society, was mirrored by the caste system of Indian society in *Strange Love*. Arnav, the rich businessman, sat at the top of the caste ladder, while Kushi, a poor country girl, occupied the lower rungs of the ladder. Regardless of caste, to be an Indian in Jamaican society often guaranteed you a space in the inner echelons of "Uptown" circles. For the children, my 'farin' Indian status automatically secured my placement in "Uptown" society. This identification was closely related to the national rhetoric of a shared understanding of culture, traditions and myths. It spoke to an essentialized being- a fixed identity. The children's placement of my social position

As the children and I built a relationship through the group discussions, the essentialized 'me' was being questioned in what Stuart Hall (1992) calls a 'decentering of the subject'. Hall, a cultural theorist, refers to the concept of difference, in which 'differ' gives way to 'defer'. For the children, my difference was no longer seen in terms of clear oppositions between "Uptown" and "Downtown", but in more complex nuances "of the trace of something which still retains its roots in one meaning while it is, as it were, moving to another…" (ibid:50). The children's discussion about uptown/downtown was not just about a general perception of class in their society, but also about an opportunity to express their feelings to an "Uptown person" about the way in which they have been treated by the "other". This highlights an important issue: how the interview space was at the same time turning into a therapeutic encounter (need to expand on this point with some psychoanalytic theory). Discussions would often ensue when the children or myself would hear a responses that we felt was inaccurate or provocative, and we would seize the moment to engage in our own critique and grievances. Thus, the space of the group sessions became important in generating open dialogues and challenging interpretations and perceptions of each and in building and co-constructing each other subjectivities.

Soap Operas, Liminal Spaces and Popular Imaginaries

Elsa: "Miss you watch Kushi this weekend? Yuh see how sweet Arnav treat her?"
Nicole: "No I didn't get a chance to watch it."
Sarah: "You have a boyfriend Auntie?"
Rayann: "Him pretty like Arnav?"
Nicole: "Yes I do"
Group: "Oooohhhh!!" [children squealing and laughing]
Nicole: "What makes Arnav sweet?"
May: "Miss, him just treat her nice!"
Elsa: "Me wish me coulda find a boyfriend like Arnav one day"
Sarah: "Him just sweet. The way him care for Kushi, and how he looks at her."
Rayann: "Him betta have a good job too. Me want him to be rich!"
Sarah: "Auntie, show us a picta of your man!"
May: *I don't care about being with a rich man. I'm going to have my own money*
Sarah: "A tru! Me a finish school, get a good job, and make mi money"
Rayann: "But me just want a man like Arnv who looks at mi like so"

As the research progressed and my relationship with the children developed, conversations about the social and political slowly crept into the realm of the personal. Knowledge was constructed at an intimate and subjective level, dooming any attempt of maintaining an attitude of detached scientism. Such personal involvement between the children and myself enriched our rapport and contributed to my own understanding of the nuances and complexities of the children's lives and also in constructing my personal narrative.

The emotions and relationships of friends and family lives, which was central to the soap narratives, also become a defining aspect of the group discussions and served as an important bridge to connect differences in geographical and economic lifestyles. In *Strange Love*, the story focuses on the cultivation of a relationship and formation of deep connection between the two main characters that are from different socioeconomic backgrounds. One young girl, Ryann mentioned that she liked watching the story unfold, and liked the slow moving nature of the story. For example, it would take on average 20 episodes of the show to see the main characters get a peck on the cheek from their love interest. In describing this episode, the other girls also mentioned that they liked watching the soap because they liked to see how much Arnav cared for Khushi, and the things he did for her to show his love, which in their view was very different than the drama that people had with relationships in Orange Tree. As the girls continued to describe the episode, they negotiated what aspects of Jamaican society they would like to change, and

Complicating Identities, Creating Alliances?

- Imposed identification of the soap opera "heroine": creation of a "delusion of alliance" (Stacey, 1988)
- Using identities as a way to connect with the study participants.
  - In a clinical setting, this allows us to build trust, for the sake of the client
  - In case of fieldwork the lines are not easily drawn, and it is not always clear who benefits from this.
- What responsibilities do we have to our participants, in witnessing and in writing?
- A move from "self-reflexivity" to "interrelational reflexivity" (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009).

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