

Millie Gone to Brazil

Femicide and Migration in Early
20th Century Barbados - Brazil

Elaine P. Rocha

*The University of the West Indies,
Cave Hill Campus, Barbados*

Series in Anthropology



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Elaine Rocha's book explores the nature of intimate partner violence against black women, using the stories of two black Barbadian women who were brutally murdered in the early part of the twentieth century — one in Barbados and one in Brazil. Her sensitive and incisive historical analysis locates these stories in the intersections between gender and labour history and provides a grim reminder that black women in the Americas are still subjected to such acts of violence today.

Dr. Alan Cobley
Emeritus Professor of History,
The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill campus, Barbados

"Millie Gone to Brazil" is far more than a simple folk song. It hints at untold stories of how Barbadian women navigated the perils of life after slavery, unprotected against the threats of multiple forms of violence. Eliana Rocha skillfully pieces together sparse traces of two women's deaths to reveal the courageous lives of those who stayed as well as those who went abroad. An important part of the history of all Bajans, and a refusal of the silences that continue to hide violence against Black women.

Dr. Kim D. Butler
Rutgers University

In memory of Dr. Karl Watson
A great historian, a devoted Barbadian, a beloved Friend

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The story of this research, however, started in 2007 and owes much to my good friend Karl Watson, who extended his friendship to me, opening his office, home, and his library – part of which became mine, when he retired from the University of the West Indies. Watson was the first person to tell me about Millie, and to sing the song to me. He did not know he was planting a seed in the vast field of my curiosity.

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All the primary and secondary sources that are originally in Portuguese were translated by me, and I chose to keep the writing style of the English primary

sources to conform with the purpose of acknowledging various voices and speeches about the crimes and their context.

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Finally, I am grateful to all Barbadians and Brazilians who reached out to tell me about their ancestors and relatives who migrated to Brazil, the experiences of migration, the history of Barbados. I also learned from friends and students, from colleagues who exchanged information and pointed to issues in my research during my public and private sharing, in Barbados, in Brazil and in the United States. This is just a glimpse of a broad project that aims to give voice to those who dared to go beyond the social and geographic borders, who are part of a not sufficiently explored current of the Great Migrations that moved populations through continents, and about which I am still learning.

Foreword

Kamala Kempadoo

York University

Femicide – the deliberate killing of women – does not often make headlines in Barbados, although violence against women is well known, and campaigns against gender-based violence are widely publicized. This study of the killing of two Barbadian women in the early twentieth century, whose murders were connected in different ways to Brazil, tells a story of femicide. It is at once a complicated story, bringing together histories of the aftermath of slavery, colonialism, patriarchy, and labour migrations, and a simple one: both women were murdered by men who were their intimate partners. In this study, Elaine Rocha does an excellent job of pulling the murders from obscurity, shedding light on the ways the violence played out and was brought to the court's attention. This is an important addition to the body of scholarly studies and research on gender-based violence that targets Caribbean women, bringing together incidences of femicide that occurred at home and in the Barbadian diaspora more than a century ago.

Violence against Black women in the Americas was normalized through slavery. As this study shows, and as Dalea Bean and Verene Shepherd remind us in their recent collection on gender-based violence in the Caribbean,¹ we cannot think about such violence in the region outside of the history of colonialism and race-based imperialism. In other words, for Caribbean women, femicide and other acts of gendered violence cannot be explained solely by men's dominance over women. Colonialism was a system of violence in which those who were enslaved and forced to labour on the plantations were routinely and legally subjected to verbal, sexual, physical and psychological abuse, including perverse and macabre punishments. Colonialism entrenched racist violence against Black people as the norm. But it is in the post-slavery period that Caribbean historians locate an intensification of gender-based violence, where overlapping systems of male dominance and patriarchies were at play, interlaced with colonial bourgeois ideals of gender. European puritanism and a Victorian morality of respectability over-determined ideas about femininity and masculinity amongst the formerly enslaved and the

¹ Dalea Bean and Verene Shepherd. *Gender-based Violence in the Caribbean: Historical Roots, Contemporary Perspectives* (University of the West Indies Press, 2025).

indentured, and set the standards for the social and intimate life of Caribbean working people. Women were defined as inferior to men, and were to be subservient and obedient, fulfilling roles as the dutiful mother and carer of the family while still having to go out to work, with men defined as the breadwinner and authority in the household and community. These gender constructs went together with oppression and exploitation on many other fronts, including the denial of the colonized to full citizenship rights and access to land and resources, and the continued suppression of non-European beliefs. But, as we know from Frantz Fanon's accounts, violence was also internalized by the colonized. Aggression, abuse and physical harm were some of the ways that colonized people responded to and resisted the system that brutalized and impoverished them. Harsh disciplinary measures, corporal punishment, verbal and physical abuse by men towards others in the same community were seen as acceptable, often also resulting in lashing out against those closest to them - their lovers and intimate partners. Violence continues to be a mode in which to express frustration or to resolve conflict, aimed especially towards those considered weaker or unruly, and domestic violence continues to be a problem in the region. Approximately 25% of women in Barbados have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner, with seven cases of femicide being reported in the Barbados media between January 2017 and December 2022.²

But this study deepens the history of femicide under colonialism. By examining the case of the killing of a Barbadian woman in Brazil by her husband, Rocha brings migrations into the equation of Caribbean life in the post-emancipation era. Many Black people sought to remove themselves from the strictures of the plantation economies once slavery was over, often seeking work in another country to build a better life. For Barbados, labour migration within the region and beyond was especially important, as the land was almost completely taken up by large sugar plantations, with few opportunities for survival independent of the plantation. Brazil, while not featuring greatly in Barbados' history of labour migration – we know so much more about migrations from Barbados to other places such as Guyana, Panama and Cuba in the 19th and early 20th centuries – still factored into Barbadians' imaginations as a possible place to go for a better future. The stories of the killing of the two Black women, Millie and Christine, give insights into the significance of Brazil for Barbadians. For Millie, it was the place her sister had disappeared to, and it was somewhere she aspired to go. The story that she “had gone to Brazil” was

² See: Taitu Heron. *Femicide Trends in the Bahamas, Barbados and Jamaica (2017–2022)*. Femi(ni)cide in Focus: Expert Series, Femicide Watch Platform. 2024. <https://femicide-watch.org/index.php/node/921244>

easy to concoct when she too disappeared. For Christine, who did make it to Brazil, we soon learn that the conditions that enabled the murder of Millie in Barbados were also present there. Brazil and Barbados share much in terms of their history of colonialism, slavery and gender-based violence, and this study shows us how very similar those conditions were. Colonialism, slavery, the violent oppression of Black people, and patriarchal gender constructs had also left strong legacies in Brazil. Migration did not change the violence Barbadian women were exposed to.

Ultimately, both women were deliberately killed by their intimate partners – Barbadian men – and the accounts of those killings say much about how Black Barbadian working-class women appeared to threaten masculine dominance and how violence was the men's way of dealing with that challenge – at home and abroad. It is a hard story, but one that is meticulously detailed here, revealing the deadly response when poor Black women strive to better themselves and defy patriarchy's rules. This story, despite not having the women's voices, is an important reminder that, despite the perceived normality of gender-based violence, Black women's experiences, dreams, and resistances are far from invisible, and can be recounted through history.

Kamala Kempadoo
Professor Emerita
Barbados, April 2026.

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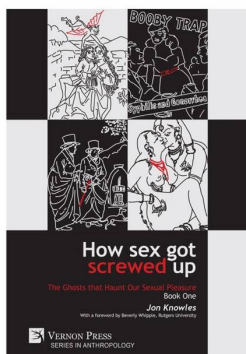
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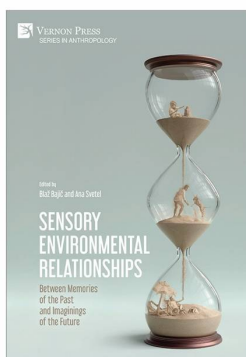
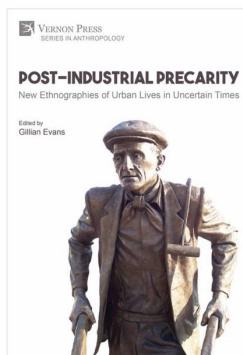
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