Book Review


In her reflective essay in this collection, Trinidadian visual artist Susan Dayal reveals that her artwork was censored by longstanding Caribbean studies journal, Small Axe, because of its representations of female nudity. That work focusing on female sexuality and embodiment would be censored in a special issue, which had as its theme “genders and sexualities,” is instructive of approaches to the subject of sexuality in the Caribbean region. There is an ongoing silence on sexuality that coexists with Caribbean feminist scholarship and queer theorizing which reveal the connections between geopolitics, political economy, coloniality and sexuality, in ways that are not always/often recognized in canonical gender and sexuality studies. Sex and the Citizen is one of the most recent collections of scholarship on sexuality and belonging in the Caribbean. It is a timely intervention that both contests and works across the binary conceptualizations of the region in global imagination: taboo and excess, stubborn homophobia and reckless hedonism, backwardness and modernity, danger and desire.

The collection disregards linguistic and geographic boundaries to represent the Caribbean as multilingual, multi-ethnic, and diasporic, as it is. It reaches beyond academia to valorize Caribbean feminist theorizing of sexuality in popular culture, long before the institutionalization of women’s studies in the Global North and South. The inclusion of analyses of legislative reform processes and creative works round out this exciting multidisciplinary collection. However, it is heavy on literary and cultural studies analyses, drawing an artificial boundary between literary studies and feminist social science and policy-oriented scholarship.

The contributions of Caribbean feminist theorizing of sexuality include: an analysis of the imbrications of freedom, coloniality, and desire, and an insistence that feminist theory has not sufficiently explored the relationship between sexuality and gender as a relation of power. Caribbean feminists have challenged political economists to take up questions of sexuality and have conceptualized decolonization to include the most intimate aspects of our lives. They have indicted Caribbean nation-building projects and multiculturalism for reconstructing patriarchal relations of domination and delimiting the citizenship of certain bodies and sexualities. The linking of imperialism, colonialism, and contemporary Caribbean tourism to post-independence Caribbean states’ exclusionary citizenship practices sutures gender and sexuality to geopolitics in both the present and the past. The epistemological groundings of this collection are unmanageable in that they work across sites that are at once local and global and across multiple, intersecting variables of race, class, color, gender, and sexuality which are in themselves unstable and shifting signifiers.

Exemplifying this approach, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s chapter on women performing gender and sexuality in Suriname challenges normalized and globalized
naming of women’s same-sex desire. She demonstrates how Caribbean feminist thought contributes to an epistemology of gender and sexuality by drawing on early twentieth century creole theorizing through women’s popular culture. She argues that creole culture posits a multiple and mutable self and sexuality not as an identity but as something Caribbean people do, as both practice and performance. She draws out the ways in which creoles language both sex and self that are different from the culturally-specific-yet-presented-as universal European grammar.

The first section of the collection emphasizes the linkages between sexuality and consumption. Anchoring these varied explorations are questions about belonging and insights on how visible identities, embodiment, and social relations of power delineate just who can be a citizen. Patricia Saunders examines sex and consumption in a multi-layered piece, which links everyday consumption practices to power relations between the United States and the Caribbean, demonstrating how sexual consumption practices such as sex tourism link the two and are embodied. She examines the politics and ethics of sexualized consumption where consumption becomes a barometer not just of modernity but of individual happiness. Sexual-economic exchange and body-commodity consumption circuits are emphasized in order to reveal the ways different forms of desire—for sex, happiness, modernity—are imbricated with each other. Hers is a form of analysis which, after Jacqui Alexander, understands gender and sexuality to be implicated in and serve as analytical tools for understanding geopolitics and political economy.

The second section highlights the diasporic Caribbean, perhaps bearing out one contributor’s suggestion that Caribbean writers who are safely located outside of the geographic Caribbean are the ones who dare to treat sexuality in their work. While a telling observation, it risks implicating the region in two kinds of sexual silences: that the literary modes of knowledge production offer more creative accounts of sexuality than social science work and that one must leave the Caribbean region in order to break the silence, particularly on same-sex desire. Feminist and LGBT rights organizing in the region has demonstrated that this is surely not the case. The collection is at its most productive where it nuances and historicizes such claims that taboo and respectability structure invisibility and silence around sexuality more broadly and same-sex sexuality specifically.

The final section does just this through its imagining of more equitable futures and productive remembering of our pasts. Antonia MacDonald-Smythe examines indigenous Caribbean socio-sexual relations among girls, noting that female friendship is undertheorized in the region. Her contribution calls in to question the ways in which multiple expressions of love, desire, belonging, and being may be colonized under a single label and ultimately distorted. It highlights the value of the locally-specific studies to uncover different ways of being in the world. The collection provides a fertile epistemological grounding from which sexuality scholars may draw as they seek to produce more highly nuanced understandings of one of the most fundamental aspects of human life. At its most provocative, it is also a challenge to scholars working in other disciplines to consider how sexuality is implicated in their work. It is a valuable contribution to both gender and sexuality studies and Caribbean studies.

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