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A Caribbean Continuum of Desire and its Limits: Review of *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination*

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Rosamond King, *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 272 pp.

For a rare and rigorous comparative analysis of how sex and sexuality function “as tools of pleasure and politics” in the Caribbean region and diaspora (1), critics *must* turn to Rosamond King’s *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* (2014). King’s monograph is refreshing, not simply because of its focus on the Caribbean continuum of sexuality from the 1970s until the present, but because of its impressive comparative depth in terms of structure and content. The comparative approach adopted by *Island Bodies* achieves a balanced attention to the Caribbean diaspora and region, while also engaging popular culture, politics, and literature from the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, and Dutch Caribbean. In addition, King’s comparativism is evident in her focus on “heterosexual and nonheterosexual experiences” (9) as she attends to the transgression and restriction of sexuality within the Caribbean imaginary and public discourse. Acknowledging that the ideal Caribbean citizen is defined primarily as a male heteronormative subject, King centers on the production and depiction of four sites of transgression: “unconventional genders, homosexuality, women’s sexual agency, and interracial relationships” (9). Throughout *Island Bodies*, King thoughtfully engages and builds upon the work of other critics who have contributed substantially to the critical articulation of sexuality studies such as Jacqui Alexander, Jafari Allen, Kamala Kempadoo, and Omise’eke Tinsley.

The introduction, “From the Foreign-Local to the Caribglobal,” displays the rich localized discourse and creative conceptual framework undergirding King’s methodology. Consistently, King translates the unique linguistic play of phrases like “el secreto abierto” and “force ripe” from the Caribbean region into conceptual material for substantiating trends in the Caribbean expression (and restriction) of sexuality and desire. On the other hand, King makes clear that she does not want to lose the untranslatability of such localized language, and accordingly, she does not “italicize non-English words when referring to what they represent and sometimes [and] consistently use[s] a non-English word or phrase instead of a translated equivalent” (17). The introduction’s title references how the ambivalence inherent in the Trinidadian term of “foreign-local” for diasporic population informs King’s articulation of the “Caribglobal” concept. King offers Caribglobal as a productive way to imagine how the specificity of each Caribbean culture can nevertheless

direct us to seeing the similarities in “conceptualizations of and attitudes towards sexuality” (4). At the intersection of the local and global, the diasporic and the regional, the Caribglobal approach seeks to tease out pan-Caribbean commonalities and disjunctures. A central contradiction that King tackles relates to how supposedly non-normative behaviors, feelings, and familial structures are the norm in Caribbean culture even though public discourse deployed by nation-states in the Caribbean region does not acknowledge these lived realities and desires (8).

The tension inherent in the concept of Cariglobal generates a productive comparative approach that explores the following questions: “How are people and cultures in different parts of the region in conversation with each other? If a phenomenon exists in both the region and the diaspora, does it exist in the same way? And, equally important, if a phenomenon exists in one area and not another, how has it evolved in its location, and why has it *not* moved?” (6). Each chapter in *Island Bodies* engages these questions by focusing on one type of transgression and reading its (re)presentation within legal discourse, political rhetoric, popular culture, and literature. Chapter One articulates a continuum of trans experience by analyzing fiction by Shani Mootoo, Michelle Cliff and Mayra Santos-Febres alongside figures of carnival transvestism from Puerto Rico, Barbados, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago. At the close of the chapter, King pairs Frantz Fanon’s “infamous” footnote about macomères with legal cases involving transgendered people in Cuba, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago. King highlights the problematics of adopting the term transgender for gender variance in the Caribbean while also emphasizing the linguistic continuity that “trans” offers across different Caribbean languages. At the same time, the trans continuum does not merely refer to the existence of trans people but also to the “backhanded deliverance” of such populations (61). In other words, a trend of backhandedness is found within Caribbean art and public discourse which, on the one hand, acknowledges the fiction of gender, but on the other, renders transgendered people as one-dimensional, marginal figures who productively facilitate or serve the needs of others (precisely because of their marginality). King teases out the parallels between this backhanded approach towards transgendered people and literary depictions of African Americans that Toni Morrison describes in *Playing in the Dark*. Displaying an impressive ability for nuance, this chapter is perhaps the most powerful in its processing of fiction of Caribbean writers—acknowledging the positive depictions of trans people by Mootoo, Cliff and Santos-Febres while also taking them to task for the way in which trans characters are developed as instruments for rather than subjects of Caribbean identity formation.

Returning to the contradictions in Caribbean responses and depictions of transgressive sexualities, King discusses the concept of “el secreto abierto” in Chapter Two, which refers to the mandate of discretion and complicity required of men who desire men by Caribbean codes of behavior. King explains that the “open

secret” refers to “a situation in which many people ‘know’ someone is a homosexual though the fact is not openly acknowledged. People ‘know’ the ‘secret’ without being told, through any combination of factors such as behaviors, speech, or dress” (64). *Island Bodies* faces head-on the tensions unique to the Caribbean locale and culture, namely, the dynamics of knowledge and (in)tolerance that diverge from the Western and/or European “‘closet’ structure” (64). The “seeming paradox of unofficial-official policies towards sexuality” in the Caribbean are mirrored by a tense level of complicity and acceptance that is based in the idea that “one [can] ‘know without knowing,’ without acknowledging knowledge of another’s sexuality” (72). The chapter’s central contribution is a calling into question of the dominant narrative about the Caribbean region as an “exceptional” or “exponential” homophobic space (82). King convincingly argues for the nuances inherent to the Caribbean continuum of sexuality by reviewing legislation in Cuba, the Dutch Antilles, and a number of other Caribbean sites, while also discussing how the mandate of discretion is depicted in the fiction of writers such as Kei Miller and Reinaldo Arenas, in documentaries like *Orgullo En Puerto Rico* and *Of Men and Gods*, as well as the art of Ewan Atkinson (which graces the cover of *Island Bodies*). With every locality, King emphasizes the similarities in how the code of the open secret is delineated while also attending to the unique historical circumstances that informed its development.

Chapter Three addresses women desiring women as part of the continuum of *el secreto abierto* but with a key difference in terms of visibility. Namely, the trope of invisibility is a trend in the imagining of queer Caribbean women, which King seeks to challenge in her analysis of activist organizations such as Grupo OREMI in Cuba, Women’s Caucus in Trinidad and Tobago, and Overlegorgaan Caribische Nederlanders in the Dutch Antilles, as well as with her readings of fiction by Dionne Brand, Shani Mootoo, R. Gay, and Marilyn Bobes. Such invisibility is due to the lack of a public for women desiring women, an invisibility that is “an active, enforced disappearing” (93). King reads the discursive silences about queer Caribbean women as signaling the threat they embody to dominant notions of Caribbean citizenship, helpfully emphasizing that invisibility is not “the same as absence, insignificance, or lack of agency” (101). Nevertheless, this “*near-invisibility*” found in Caribbean public discourse is reproduced in fiction by queer Caribbean women (102), with “self-identified nonheterosexual Anglophone Caribbean women shy[ing] away from writing novels that focus on women’s same sex desires” (103-104). In other words, queer desire and sexuality are “rarely the focus of the main storyline” (104). King’s review of activism by sexual minorities within the Caribbean is therefore instrumental in fleshing out the lived realities and movements towards visibility that the genre of fiction cannot yet realize fully. What kind of gaze enables seeing these women, then? *Island Bodies* seeks to model such a gaze, with King’s analysis of LGBTQA grassroots organizations and their

rhetorical positioning providing an essential historical context for queer women within the pan-Caribbean continuum of sexuality.

Chapters Four and Five concentrate on transgressions within the heterosexual continuum, alternately focusing on Caribbean women's "force ripe" sexual agency and men's interracial relationships. In discussing the Caribglobal "cult of true oomanhood," King highlights "a set of restrictive gender codes for women and girls found throughout the region and its diaspora" (125). Women's sexual agency potentially challenges this code of conduct, which serves to reinforce the nation-state's definition of "heterosexual, monogamous, conjugal families" as the ideal (128). In order to emphasize that transgressions against the cult of oomanhood are not recent or contemporary, King reviews Caribbean cultural traditions in that undermine this norm while remaining heteropatriarchal, such as the Indo-Caribbean matikor and Guyanese kwe-kwe ceremonies. Certainly, the pan-Caribbean approach that King deploys is the central contribution of Chapter Four, which also analyzes fiction by well-known authors such as Jamaica Kincaid and Maryse Condé alongside Patricia Selbert, a writer from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora. Additionally, King compares the representation and reception of women's sexual agency in popular music by discussing the Caribglobal Queens of zouk, chutney, reggaeton, soca and Top-40 hip-hop—from Jocelyne Béroard to Ivy Queen to Rihanna. In analyzing lyrics, music videos, blog postings and other mediascapes, King is able to contextualize the unique cultural contexts of each Queen and emphasize the continuities between their self-representation and reception.

Chapter Five similarly engages the "Great Men" public narratives of Caribbean hypermasculinity, emphasizing how the deification of the anticolonial Caribbean male is fractured by the "spectacular failure of male leadership, if not of Caribbean masculinity" (162). King highlights the function of interracial relationships within Caribbean politics, tourism, film and literature, wherein "sex with white women" is articulated "as a way to reinforce Caribbean masculinity" (162). Such narratives necessarily (dis)engage with central stereotypes of Caribbean masculinity: the Latin Lover, the Docile Indian, and the Black Stud. The chapter reveals how these stereotypes operate in the public narratives about Caribbean men in interracial relationships, discussing the Dominican Republic's Porfirio Rubirosa, Jamaica's Bob Marley, and Surinam's Waldemar Nods. In addition, King reads the transgression of interracial relationships in the fiction of V.S. Naipaul, Junot Díaz, and Dany Laferrière as well as the films *The Lunatic* and *Heading South*. Even as these texts similarly develop the racialization of Caribbean male sexuality, King notes that genre emphasizes different locations and contexts for interracial relationships, with the films "portraying sex work [...] within the Caribbean, while the literary texts are largely set in the diaspora and portray relationships not based primarily on financial exchange" (163). The Caribglobal

approach developed in the chapter consequently draws out the unique divergences between regional and diasporic cultural production, allowing for a discussion of various historical contexts that produce this disjuncture, from slavery to migratory movements, from stigmatized sexual relationships to blanquamiento.

One could be forgiven for imagining that the variety and range of sources could fragment such a critical project, but *Island Bodies* navigates and threads together quite seamlessly a collage of voices in order to construct a holistic and dynamic picture of Caribbean sexualities. *Island Bodies* is a transformative read, which certainly fulfills the writer's "hope that readers would gain some understanding of the remarkable commonalities found in Caribbean attitudes to sexuality" (5). Critics of Caribbean studies as well as those of women, gender and sexuality studies will find that King's monograph sets the standard for an attention to both locality and continuity that are made possible by performing such excellently nuanced interdisciplinary work. The Afterword of *Island Bodies* calls for a "recognition of the breadth of imagination that already exists in Caribglobal communities" and in a large part King's research embodies that pan-Caribbean range, transforming the imagination of the reader so that s/he can envision a continuum of sexual experiences and realities across the region and diaspora (198). Additionally, the clarity of King's writing not only makes it a pleasure to read, but also accessible to a variety of readerships and therefore extremely teachable.

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