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The Sweetest Taboo: Studies of Caribbean Sexualities; A Review Essay

The study of sexuality in the Caribbean has historically been taboo, off-limits for scholarly research. Part of the forbidden nature of the subject has to do with a fear of reproducing the negative stereotyping of black hypersexuality that emerged from a history of slavery and colonialism. It is well known that slave owners claimed that they had to impose strict codes of morality on their slaves to manage the sexual promiscuity of Africans. At the same time, they frowned on slave marriages because permanent unions undermined the sale and leasing of their property. Yet social restrictions and racial stereotypes do not tell the entire story of the sexual practices of African slaves and their descendants, even if such practices have been relegated to the silent spaces of the historical records. Hortense Spillers's observation about studies of African American women's sexuality holds true for the Caribbean: "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb" (1984, 74). But in the Caribbean a silence about the topic of sexuality also has to do with the Victorian attitudes that exist as a holdover from the region's colonial past.

Suzanne LaFont's "Very Straight Sex: The Development of Sexual Morés in Jamaica" (2001) is one of the few works that examines the colonial history of Caribbean attitudes toward sexuality, at least as they are expressed in Jamaica. LaFont wants to account for the conditions that have contributed to the tacit acceptance of a woman prostituting herself to support her children so long as she maintains a public face of respectability, while two men seen holding hands in the street can be stoned to death. For the answer, she looks at how slaves developed their own sexual ideologies out of both African and British codes of sexual conduct. She argues that the value placed on respectability in the Caribbean came from a class of freed slaves who hoped to achieve social mobility through moral character. However, freed slaves stopped short of embracing a Christian devalorization of extrareproductive sex. "The creole sexual ideology ap-

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2006, vol. 32, no. 1]

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proved of sexual activity as a natural part of human pleasure,” she writes, “but sexuality had to be expressed within the confines of respectability” (LaFont 2001, par. 57). The complex interplay between sexuality and respectability has historically undergirded scholarship on gender and sexuality in the Caribbean. The topics of women’s sexuality and sexual needs were subsumed within studies of kinship and family, while homosexuality was treated as if it simply did not exist.

This scholarly treatment has substantially changed during the past five years with the publication of several book-length studies of sex work, sexuality, and masculinity by academics located in Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States. In *Learning to Be a Man*, Jamaican anthropologist Barry Chevannes notes that approximately 50 percent of Jamaican men engage in polygamy or multiple relationships, a sexual practice that is seen as enhancing their masculinity so long as all activity is strictly heterosexual (2001, 216–17). Two edited collections, Rhoda Reddock’s *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities* (2004) and Linden Lewis’s *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean* (2003b), also emphasize the role of sexuality in Caribbean gender roles, but they expand the category of masculinity to include homosexual practices. In his anthropological study, *Opacity: Gender, Sexuality, Race, and the “Problem” of Identity in Martinique* (2002), David Murray argues that sexual identity in the Caribbean is less fixed than the labels of *heterosexual* and *homosexual* suggest. Murray finds complexity and even contradiction in the ways that Martinican men engage in their sexuality in various public spheres, from civic participation to carnival. An unpacking of the presumed heteronormativity of Caribbean identity is also evident in a special issue of *Small Axe* on “Genders and Sexualities” (Smith 2000), which includes essays on unruly sexualities, homophobia, homoeroticism, and gay rights. Although Carolyn Cooper’s *Sound Clash* (2004) is not about sexuality per se, it rejects a middle-class morality that frowns on the “slackness” of Jamaican dancehall culture, arguing instead that dancehall provides an outlet for working-class black women to express their sexuality.

If not the “beached whale” of gender studies, Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality is more like the elephant in the room, caught in the tension between Indo-Caribbean (male) identity and Afro-Caribbean women’s sexuality. The past five years have also brought a small but significant burst in scholarship on Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality, much of it focused on the analysis of cultural texts. While Shalini Puri’s *The Caribbean Postcolonial* (2004) and Brinda Mehta’s *Diasporic Dis(Locations)* (2004) are studies of Indo-Caribbean literature, they both address the question of

Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality—a topic about which practically nothing has been written before.

Recent work on the complexities of Caribbean sexuality and sexual culture reflects a shift from earlier models of feminist criticism that longed to recuperate more respectable representations of women. Kamala Kempadoo, in *Sexing the Caribbean* (2004), boldly calls for a different way of thinking about Caribbean hypersexuality, less as a fabrication of the European imagination and more as a lived reality. She debunks the idea that heterosexual serial monogamy is the norm, making a case for a diversity of sexual practices that include informal polygamy as well as bisexual and same-sex relations. Kempadoo's study grew out of an earlier collection she edited on sex work, *Sun, Sex, and Gold* (1999b), building on its bottom-up approach of grounding theory in qualitative sociological methodologies. The essays in *Sun, Sex, and Gold*, along with Denise Brennan's *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2004), reveal how Caribbean women see sex work as a legitimate way to raise money for purchasing a home for their families or sending their children to private schools. They show how both men and women who inhabit marginal sexual spaces assume an active agency over their sex lives, sometimes rebelling against narrowly defined sexual regimes. They also demonstrate that the current conditions of transnationalism and globalization have contributed to a greater visibility and urgency to sexual issues.

The new scholarship merges research on gender and sexuality with the transnational perspective that has guided gender studies since the early 1990s. As several of the studies suggest, transnationalism is more complex and more intimately connected with local gender and sexual identity than an easy binary can maintain. Reflecting the complexities of a region defined by heterogeneity, this work stakes out fresh critical terrain in its refusal to offer the Caribbean up to the normalizing gaze of dominant Western discourse or nostalgic myths of indigenous pasts. Instead, much of the new research negotiates a model of difference as both an analytical challenge to preexisting scholarship and as the lived reality of the Caribbean. A transnational perspective allows scholars to include as part of the Caribbean the gay men and lesbian women who migrated out of the region to countries that are more tolerant of their sexual identities. In addition, the battle to contain the spread of AIDS necessitates a recognition of heterosexual and homosexual activity outside of monogamous relations as well as how sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are most prevalent among migrant labor populations.

Globalization has involved not only an economic restructuring of the

world but a sexual one as well, as cash-poor developing nations have increasingly become drawn into the network of a global sex trade. As tourism has grown to become a significant portion of the Caribbean economy, the exchange of sexual services for money has also become embedded within it. In her anthropological study of a tourist resort town on the north coast of the Dominican Republic, Brennan presents Sosúa as a transnational space both in terms of its culture, which caters to European tourists, and as a point of departure abroad for Dominican sex workers (2004, 41). Building on Arjun Appadurai's identification of new global landscapes, she invokes the term *sexscape* to describe the conditions under which "a global economy of commercialized sexual transactions" exists (2004, 15–16). The increased impoverishment of third-world women, global inequalities between North and South nations, and cheaper and easier travel all contribute to some regions of the world being transformed into brothels for tourists who vacation overseas. This new research confirms LaFont's claim that "sex as a commodity remains a harsh reality for many Jamaican men and women" (2001, par. 62) as surely as it understands the multifaceted ways in which Caribbean people negotiate the relationship between sexuality and globalization.

Studies of sex work in the Caribbean belong to the growing scholarship on the global spread of sex tourism since the late 1980s.¹ As small third-world nations have become increasingly debt ridden, they have entered into competition with one another for the hard currency that tourism provides. Beverley Mullings (1999) makes a case for the rise of sex tourism in Jamaica being linked (if only informally) to the national policies on flexible tourism developed since the 1980s. Twenty years of structural adjustments and the elimination of preferred markets for Jamaica's bauxite and bananas have led to tourism being the major earner of foreign currency. In today's competitive market, the explicit marketing of all-inclusive superresorts as places for uninhibited sex increases the demand for sex tourism. As sex has become part of the exotic fantasies that destinations around the world offer tourists, sex tourism has grown to become a multibillion-dollar industry. The ease with which the global North can consume the bodies of black and brown-skinned men and women is linked to a transnational economy in which Caribbean nations are transformed into service-oriented labor centers for Europe, the United States, and Canada.

The Caribbean region's increased impoverishment since the 1980s has

¹ See Truong 1990; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Robinson and Bishop 1998; Ryan and Hall 2001; Seabrook 2001.

also produced a mobile labor force of migrant sex workers who not only travel from rural to urban areas but also island-hop to perform sexual services. Although there are places where sex camps are set up specifically for sailors and migrant laborers, for the most part male and female prostitution thrives on the constant flow of tourists to the area. The most mobile are Dominican women, whose “SanDom” look of brown skin, slim bodies, and long, curly hair makes them the most desirable in the sex industry. Dominican women are featured on the Internet as mail-order brides or escorts for men’s vacations (Brennan 2004, 194). They travel to Italy, Germany, and Austria, and the Dominican Republic ranks fourth (after the Philippines, Thailand, and Brazil) in the export of sex workers to Western countries (Cabezas 1999, 112–13).² Following Thanh-Dam Truong, who has written on sex tourism in Southeast Asia, the contributors to *Sun, Sex, and Gold* distinguish sex labor, which is “the use of the body as an instrument to produce a service” (Truong 1990, 65; quoted in Kempadoo 1999a), from sex, which is an activity for physical pleasure and procreation. At the same time, they establish a continuum between sex work and domesticity. Migration allows women to maintain an image of respectability in their hometowns. As a result, sex workers in the tourist trade often do not consider themselves prostitutes. Brennan, for instance, demonstrates how sex workers are able to send their children to private schools with the money they earn, thereby reaffirming their identity as good mothers.

The books on sex work in the Caribbean (Kempadoo 1999b, 2004; Brennan 2004) represent a paradigm shift inasmuch as, first, they treat prostitution as a legitimate alternative to low-paying domestic work or jobs in the export-processing zones; second, they break down the rigid boundary between sex work and domesticity; and, finally, they articulate how workers exercise some control over their exploitation. The studies attempt to find a place for women’s agency and dignity within an occupation that was previously treated by feminists as degrading and exploitative. Characterizing sex work as one of the limited options available to poor, uneducated women for feeding and clothing their children, Kempadoo includes it with other informal forms of self-employment such as “higglering” or “huckstering” as one of the strategies for survival that the Jamaican writer and sociologist Olive Senior identifies as “making do” (Kempadoo 1999a, 19–20, 2004, 64). Both men and women see sex

² Unlike the Dominican women whose island they share, Haitian women are not a significant part of the migrant sex labor force because they are considered too dark-skinned to be sexually desirable (Kempadoo 2004, 143).

work as a path to social mobility either through its superior earning power over other forms of unskilled labor or, ideally, as the path to marriage with either a man or a woman who is willing to support them—a move that is rife with contradictions.

Sun, Sex, and Gold, the earliest of the three books on sex work reviewed here, grew out of a 1995 research project undertaken by a group of Latin American and Caribbean feminists to document sex tourism in Belize, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Jamaica, the Netherlands Antilles, Suriname, and the Colombian coastal city of Cartagena. In addition, there are a couple of essays that examine prostitution in Suriname and Guyana, where the gold-mining industries have resulted in the establishment of sex camps for servicing migrant male workers. The editor also decided to include an essay on sex tourism in Cuba. The essays all give voice to the sex workers through a social science methodology that involved conducting interviews, surveys, and focus groups with sex workers and their clients. The advantage of this method is that it offers a rich insight into the misconceptions tourists and locals have about each other and provides a unique look at how the women approach their work.

Brennan's anthropological study *What's Love Got to Do with It?* offers an ethnography of the culture and ideology of sex tourism. The study opens with the story of a German tourist, Jürgen, who favored a young Dominican sex worker named Elena. Whenever he visited Sosúa, he took her to restaurants, discos, and casinos in its more affluent tourist zone, affording her a lifestyle that she could otherwise view only from the outside. He then moved her, along with her daughter and younger sisters, out of her one-room wooden shantytown shack into a two-bedroom apartment with electricity and running water. This transformation is known among the sex workers as *La Gloria* (the glory). In order to avoid paying taxes in Germany, Jürgen eventually moved his business to Sosúa and began living with Elena, who happily quit the sex trade to settle into her new role as "wife," especially after she discovered that she was pregnant with his child. But their relationship quickly deteriorated. Jürgen was an alcoholic and womanizer who spent most of his time in Sosúa's bars. Once Elena became dependent on him for money, she realized that he was not so generous as before. She ended up moving back to the shantytown she came from with no more money than what she had when she left. Her situation was worse than before as she now had another child to support. Jürgen denied paternity of the boy, claiming, "There is no way I could have a son this black" (Brennan 2004, 8). Brennan exposes the racial assumption on which the sex worker's fantasy of *La Gloria* is based—namely, that white men treat them better than their own men do (2004, 9).

What's Love Got to Do with It? is rich with Elena's and others' stories of the women's daily lives and their thoughts about the work they do. As a cultural anthropologist, Brennan is not as interested in mining the information she gathers from the sex workers for facts as she is in understanding the women's beliefs, value systems, and strategies for economic mobility. She discovers that they reproduce dominant gender ideologies such as the virgin/whore opposition through their assertions of being good mothers, the implication of which is that they are not *putas*, or prostitutes (2004, 174–75). And, although the women often earn more than the Dominican men with whom they live, the men assume the trickster persona of *tigueres* (tigers) to recast their economic reliance on the women in terms of machismo (Brennan 2004, 38).

While Brennan demonstrates a continuity between the women's ideology of sex work and domesticity, Kempadoo, in *Sexing the Caribbean* (2004), breaks down the distinction made in previous studies between *sex tourism*, a term reserved for female prostitution, and *romance tourism*, a term introduced by Deborah Pruitt and LaFont (1995) for heterosexual male sex work. Heterosexual male sex workers do not identify themselves as prostitutes but rather as “beach boys,” hustlers, “sanky-pankies,” and “rent-a-dreads.”³ The different sexual coding of male and female sex workers is underpinned by Caribbean ideologies of masculinity and femininity, according to which male sexual prowess is a sign of virility while female promiscuity is coded as a deficiency in moral values. “The whore stigma,” writes Kempadoo, “is a powerful discourse that both dishonors and controls, in particular but not exclusively, female sexuality, supporting laws that outlaw or prohibit ‘deviant’ sexuality” (2004, 146). The men who receive financial benefits from female tourists, by contrast, are able to harness the racial image of Afro-Caribbean men as studs in order to realign their subordination to white heterosexual masculinity (Phillips 1999).

The coding of heterosexual male sex work as romance simultaneously desexualizes white women through the idea that they seek romance with Caribbean men rather than physical sex. The female clients, however, express a curiosity about sex with a black man that they would be less likely to explore in their home countries. Although the women appear to be breaking racial taboos, Kempadoo argues that they differ little from their male counterparts in the consumption of Caribbean sexuality (2004, 129). As is the case with female sex workers, male prostitutes use to their advantage, even as they reproduce, the racial and gendered fantasies the

³ The term *rent-a-dread* for describing Jamaican beach hustlers emerged in the 1990s following the marketability of the Bob Marley look (Kempadoo 2004, 130).

West has of Caribbean people. The rent-a-dread phenomenon plays into an exotic and erotic image of the laid-back Rasta man that accompanied the global spread of roots reggae music. Meanwhile, the popularity of Terry McMillan's novel *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* engendered the sudden appearance of numerous "Winstons" on Jamaica's beaches. If beach hustlers do engage in sex with male clients it is not out of a proclivity for homosexual relations but out of the understanding that men can pay more than women. "Rather than concluding that a gendered difference underlies various forms of sex work," concludes Kempadoo, "male and female sex work can both be seen to represent the complexity of relationships that emerge between a client/economic provider and a prostitute/lover, which range from explicit sexual-economic exchanges to more protracted liaisons, romantic attachments, or marriage" (1999a, 26). Brennan similarly argues that the "performance" of being in love—a strategy that was initiated by "sankies"—is crucial to the success of female sex work (2004, 103).

Tourists often extend the romance of their vacation on an island paradise to the sex workers themselves. Kempadoo offers evidence of male clients downplaying the economic transactions with female sex workers, describing the women as not really prostitutes but women who genuinely enjoy the "hot sex" they can get with white men (2004, 124). The male clients' rationalization, she argues, both relies on the racial stereotyping of black and brown women as oversexed and exhibits a refusal to recognize the exploitative nature of the relationship. While male clients delude themselves into thinking that brown-skinned women prefer them sexually to their own men, Dominican sex workers reported to Brennan that the capacity to earn more money was the primary reason for entering the trade (2004, 119–53). Sex tourism reinforces the rigidly gendered racial hierarchies that are the legacy of Caribbean slavery and colonialism. Male tourists prefer Dominican and Colombian women, who do not identify themselves as black, over Haitians, who are considered "too black" and "unhygienic." Dominican women are also seen to be more passionate and domestic than European women, whom the men characterize as frigid and self-centered (Cabezas 1999, 111; Brennan 2004, 33–36; Kempadoo 2004, 104). What does it mean for Caribbean sex workers to improve their lives by subjecting themselves to the very hierarchies that have contributed to their subordinated position in the first place?

All three books are careful not to romanticize the lives of sex workers or to ignore their vulnerability in a highly exploitative industry. The interviews reveal the distaste sex workers have for the services they are required to deliver, and there is always the potential for contracting sex-

ually transmitted diseases, being beaten or raped, or being harassed by the police.⁴ Yet very often the desire to present sex workers as subjects, by letting them speak for themselves, left us begging for greater analysis. This is especially the case when there appeared to be inconsistencies between the workers' claims and the social reality of the business.

In one of the better essays in the *Sun, Sex, and Gold* collection, "'Givin' Lil' Bit fuh Lil' Bit': Women and Sex Work in Guyana," the Red Thread Women's Development Programme (1999), an activist research group, is able to strike a balance between endorsing sex workers' desires for financial stability and recognizing the obstacles they face. The research group notes a complex code of conduct and set of rules among Guyanese female sex workers that gives them greater agency over their work. "Far from being passive women who men can simply pick up and have their way with," the researchers report, "the sex workers we spoke with were actively involved in negotiating the terms of the exchange and some rules of the game" (1999, 276). At the same time, the social marginalization of the women left them vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, not only by their pimps but also by arresting police officers, while their plans to invest in businesses, return home, or get an education were undermined by the high cost of living. Although the women claimed awareness of the risks of contracting STDs, the relatively high incidence of diseases and pregnancies among them indicated to the researchers that they were not always able to enforce the practice of safe sex. The Red Thread Women's Development Programme expresses methodological difficulty in articulating sexual agency within the constraints under which sex workers operate:

Undoubtedly, foregrounding the spaces that sex workers create for themselves enables us to avoid a perspective, however well-meaning, that depicts such women as victims. At the same time, an emphasis on the sexual agency of women should not lead to a prematurely romanticized portrayal of resistance and in the process foreclose a discussion of the very real constraints that sex workers face in their daily lives, both on as well as off the job. It is important to explore how women negotiate limits and challenge their ongoing marginalization in Guyanese society and to acknowledge that many simply may not succeed. (1999, 278)

⁴ In their essay on child prostitution in Colombia (1999), Laura Mayorga and Pilar Velásquez remind us that domestic workers are equally vulnerable. It is common for employers to keep young female domestic workers as virtual slaves and to abuse them both physically and sexually.

In order to account for the gap between women's perception of sex work as a short-term solution to economic hardship and the difficulty they experience in achieving their goals, the research group examines what it identifies as slippages in the interview transcripts. This approach involves an attentiveness not only to the women's words but also to their bodies and actions as texts to be interpreted.

Brennan's study similarly reveals how sex work is not a path to social mobility even in situations where the workers exercise greater control over their relationships with their clients. Dominican women in Sosúa have an advantage over other Caribbean sex workers inasmuch as they deal directly with foreign men rather than going through a pimp and can use the men's preference for brown-skinned women to their advantage (Brennan 2004, 154). Despite the women's confidence that the men who patronized them would marry them, Brennan reports that the clients often stopped sending remittances or visiting the women once they returned to Europe. Most of Sosúa's sex workers, after a brief enjoyment of *La Gloria*, ended up in the same economic condition (or an even worse economic condition than) they were in when they started. "I had set out to write a feminist ethnography of the sex trade to raise questions about poor women's power, control, and opportunities in a globalized economy," Brennan records. "Yet the waters are murky when considering women's agency in the sex trade, no matter how determined and creative their efforts to get ahead" (2004, 211). Brennan's admission is a sobering reminder of how globalization has deepened rather than eliminated poverty in the Caribbean.

The restrictions economic deprivation places on sex workers' ability to transform their lives is most evident in the studies of the two regions where tourism is not a major contributing factor to sex work: Suriname and Guyana. Interestingly enough, the women who service local men in Suriname's gold mining industry have the same fantasy as sex workers in the Dominican tourist industry—namely, that a preferred client would rescue them from the sex trade. They engage in unprotected sex with these men only to find themselves exposed to STDs and left with yet another mouth to feed (Antonius-Smits et al. 1999, 248). The women who service men working the gold mines in the Suriname interior are brought from Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. Although the government licenses the nightclubs (which are essentially brothels) on the condition that workers maintain regular health checkups, many of the unlicensed sex workers are illegal migrant Guyanese women who avoid STD checkups for fear of being deported. Interviews conducted with licensed and unlicensed workers reveal them to be relatively ignorant about STD transmission, and most performed unprotected oral and vaginal sex

(Antonius-Smits et al. 1999, 249–50). Many claim to have intended to use condoms, but the men would either insist on unprotected sex or offer to pay more for it. As one sex worker explains, “When you are hustling in order to feed yourself and your children, the extra money that a man offers for unsafe sex lets you take the chance and forget about any disease” (Antonius-Smits et al. 1999, 251). A statement of this kind demonstrates the dire economic conditions under which many of the sex workers operate.

Sex workers have begun to organize around work conditions and health issues, and the largest organizations are the Maxi Linder Association of Suriname and the Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas in the Dominican Republic (Mellon 1999, 312). The Caribbean has the second highest rate of HIV infection in the world, and AIDS is the leading cause of death in the twenty-five- to forty-five-year-old age group of both men and women (Kempadoo 2004, 167). Despite the popular belief that the epidemic was introduced via beach boys who engaged in sex with Western male tourists, statistics show that the disease is transmitted primarily among male and female migrants, heterosexual sex workers, and Caribbean gay men. In fact, the fear of contracting AIDS, accompanied by increased homophobia in the region, has resulted in a decrease in the organized homosexual tours that took place during the late 1980s (Cabezas 1999, 100). The spread of AIDS in the Caribbean is due to a number of factors, including an early initiation into sexual activity, the practice of informal polygamy among men, sex work for extra cash among women, and a repressive culture that has driven homosexuality underground (McEvoy 2000).

Sex tourism feeds the resentment in the Caribbean toward women’s sexual liberation and homosexuality, and also the perception of them as Western imports. When locals see foreigners leading hedonistic lifestyles and exploring their sexuality outside the restraints placed on them at home, they get a lopsided perspective of the presumed sexual freedom experienced in the countries from which the tourists come. Gay tourism conforms to, rather than breaks with, the logic of heterosexual consumer capitalism, which positions Western tourists in an imperial relation to Caribbean sex workers. It all comes down to unequal relations of power. As Kempadoo writes in her introduction to *Sun, Sex, and Gold*: “Prostitution in the Caribbean is inextricably tied to the power and control exerted by European colonizers over black women since the sixteenth century” (1999a, 5). Hence, even when the clients belong to relatively disempowered groups in their home countries—women, gays, and racial minorities—their financial ability to travel overseas places them in a colonizing relationship to the people from whom they purchase sexual ser-

vices. Rather than eliminating the cultural differences and racial hierarchies that are the legacy of slavery and colonialism, globalization reworks them for new markets.

Characterizing globalization as a “cunning euphemism for the old imperial politics of appropriation and exploitation,” Cooper’s *Sound Clash* valorizes “the local” in its study of Jamaican dancehall culture at home and in the diaspora (2004, 1). As Cooper explains in her introduction, her approach “is stubbornly rooted in a politics of place that claims a privileged space for the local and asserts the authority of the native as speaking subject” (2004, 2). She considers Jamaica’s Victorian morality to be a holdover from a colonial era that denigrated African survivals in music and dance by characterizing such forms of expression as lewd and immoral. In this regard, she understands the sexually explicit dancehall performances of the female DJ Lady Saw to be a recontextualization of African fertility figures like the Yoruba Oshun (Cooper 2004, 103–5). A Jamaican public discourse that identifies dancehall with slackness, she argues, has a gender bias built into the association of slackness with a woman of loose morals. Claiming that slackness disputes a patriarchal gender ideology, Cooper sees dancehall as the site for alternative, more popular definitions of culture. In this regard, she wants to give credence to a form of working-class culture in which black women participate because it validates their “full-bodied female sexuality” (2004, 86) against a middle-class cultural norm that identifies beauty with light-skinned, European-featured Jamaican women.

Sound Clash is a defense of dancehall against its critics, who fault the popular Jamaican reggae music for its misogynistic and homophobic lyrics and its objectification of women as mindless sexualized bodies. Cooper, by contrast, reads dancehall as a valid form of female sexual expression—a liberating space for women to play out erotic roles that transgress Jamaica’s rigid social conventions. She seeks to undo the value traditionally placed on respectability, which she defines as an elite vision of Culture (spelled with a capital C). Cooper characterizes dancehall’s mostly working-class women, who don synthetic wigs, large false eyelashes, “batty riders” (shorts that ride up on the bottom), and push-up bras, as engaging in a performance that allows them to “big up” their person and present themselves as desiring sexual beings rather than mere sex objects. The raw lyrics and sexualized body language of women DJs like Lady Saw constitute for her a battle over gender power and women’s right to public space. Hence, where some critics fault dancehall for the misogyny of its lyrics, Cooper sees in it a celebration that liberates black women’s sexuality from the strictures of a middle-class Victorian sensibility.

Cooper flaunts the “vulgarity” of working-class culture before Jamaica’s guardians of morality, and, in this regard, her book initiates a much-needed discussion of pleasure and sexuality. However, she goes to such lengths to read dancehall as a subversive cultural form that she side-steps the contradictions in the popular music. Although we would not go so far as to argue that, through their sexually explicit dancing, dancehall queens are simply subjecting themselves to the male gaze, we would hesitate to assert, as Cooper does, that their dance is the expression of an entirely female agency. In her reading of women’s sexual empowerment through the Trinidadian carnival dance style known as wining, Natasha Barnes concludes that “acts of libidinal self-assertion exist uneasily with the pleasures and real dangers of commodification and fetishism” (2000, 105).

Missing from Cooper’s study is a discussion of how dancehall upholds Jamaica’s narrow definition of permissible sexual acts. Dancehall lyrics celebrate Jamaican men as black stallions and valorize women with tight pussies and big breasts. And, despite Lady Saw’s brazen display of a female sexuality that parodies black hypermasculinity, like her male counterparts she condemns heterosexual anal and oral sex.⁵ Cooper explains the expressed disgust for eating “fur burger” as an instance of DJs “protesting too much,” and she concludes that “there is a thin line between pub(lic) discourse and private pleasure/duty” (2004, 100). We would have liked to read more about the contradiction between public discourse and private practice that Cooper identifies, particularly since men’s public display of heterosexuality through marriage and fatherhood works to conceal their engagement in private same-sex encounters. Cooper mentions Ce’Cile, a female DJ who promotes cunnilingus in “Do It to Me,” but the reference is buried in a footnote (2004, 309). She also suggests in her introduction that women engage in a sexual role-playing that “may even be explicitly homoerotic” (2004, 17), but she does not elaborate on this point in her book.

Sound Clash endorses more than it questions Jamaican public discourse on homosexuality. Because Cooper adopts a local perspective, her book expresses the popular sentiment that efforts to liberalize Jamaica’s sexual mores represent a form of cultural imperialism imposed from the outside.

⁵ When Lady Saw was brought up on obscenity charges for grabbing her crotch on stage, she defended her action by arguing that she was mimicking one of Michael Jackson’s most popular dance moves. While some might assert that Jackson’s move is itself a parody of black hypermasculinity, Lady Saw’s appropriation of a male sexual gesture undoes the neat binarism of masculinity and femininity.

Her Jamaican approach establishes an insider/outsider opposition that is difficult to maintain in today's transnational world. Through her use of the Jamaican *outernational* for *international* (because *inter* is not recognized as a morpheme in Jamaican language), Cooper forgoes the in-betweenness suggested by *inter* in favor of an insider's position. As a result, she aligns a transnational gay rights organization—the Jamaica Forum of Lesbian, All-Sexuals, and Gays (J-FLAG)—with the outernational response of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation to the homophobic lyrics of dancehall music and argues that, rather than needing any impetus from Western nations, Jamaica is liberalizing its sexual policies on its own.⁶

Yet an acknowledgment of homophobia in the Caribbean does not grapple with the multiple anecdotal and sociological narratives of Jamaica's refusal to accept in discourse what it readily acknowledges in local, lived realities. Chevannes recounts the story of a schoolteacher's open identification of his sexual orientation within his community until an accusation of improper sexual conduct is brought by one of his students and he is forced out of town (2001, 203). Such a precarious status, living as an open secret within a community that could turn on you for becoming too visible, seems to be an entirely vexed arrangement. Lawson Williams in his *Small Axe* article on "Homophobia and Gay Rights Activism in Jamaica" (2000) focuses on the very complexity of the responses that Cooper hails in her attempt to map the public debates on homosexuality in Jamaica. Alluding to the local reaction to the formation of J-FLAG in 1998, Williams characterizes Jamaican public sentiment as "a common understanding that the issue of gayness must never enter the 'national arena' or at least not in any way that gives the issue any political legitimacy" (2000, 108). The acceptance of a queer person within a given community, in other words, is contingent not just on the invisibility of his or her particular sexual practice but also on the absence of any political activism around his or her sexuality.

While reiterating the supposed non-African roots of same-sex desire, *Sound Clash* is careful not to align itself with homophobia itself as a sentiment. Cooper critiques its use as a political weapon and asserts that "one must be prepared to fight for a much more progressive position on homosexuality on the very battleground that the DJ specifies as the African Jamaican cultural terrain" (2004, 50). Without rehearsing Cooper's numerous arguments about and excuses for the misunderstood context of

⁶ The J-FLAG Web site indicates that the organization has a Kingston-based mailbox but will not disclose its address for fear of retribution.

dancehall's pervasive discourse on homosexuality (including her contention that as a cathartic outlet for homophobia it can prevent violence against gay men), it might be more productive to note the sophisticated twist that she brings to the branding of *gay* as Western bourgeois decadence. She claims that the United States and the United Kingdom have "highly politicized groups of male and female homosexuals" who "wield substantial power" (2004, 170) that stirs up most of the international controversy surrounding homophobia, particularly in the case of Buju Banton's explicitly antihomosexual song "Boom By-By." Displacing this vague power onto non-Jamaican gays and lesbians, Cooper proceeds to explain that the debate surrounding the song "is a classic test case of the degree to which local Jamaican cultural values can be exported without censure into a foreign market" (2004, 170). Here, *queer* is inextricable from Western and global capitalist identities, just as *heterosexual* is from local and oppressed ones.

What is striking about *Sound Clash* is that it recognizes the power of culture (especially language and music) in shaping politically significant identities in the Caribbean, while at the same time it refuses to acknowledge the very real threat of violence against homosexuals it may pose. Cooper's attention to the cultural specificities of national-sexual mores, as well as the vocabulary of dancehall itself, is commendable, but it exhibits some of the "schizophrenia of a sexually conservative society undergoing and resisting profound transformation" that she herself diagnoses (2004, 52). In the name-calling of queerness, documented in Cooper's exhaustive defense and diffusion of such language as threats, antihomosexual language reinforces the violence of state discourse on homosexuality as well as the physical threat that many Jamaican gays and lesbians have given as reasons to remain closeted or to leave the country.

In order to take up new visions of queer identities across the Caribbean diaspora, other scholars have exposed the foundational role that the policing of sexuality played in the formation of Caribbean postcolonial nations. The pioneering work of Trinidadian-born black lesbian writer and activist M. Jacqui Alexander in the 1990s also characterizes the heteropatriarchal discourse of the nation-state as a schizophrenic identity produced through the twinned legacies of hypersexual representation and intense sexual repression (1994, 1997).⁷ In addition, however, she outlines how the state marginalized homosexuality as Western, as having been created or brought by European colonizers to the previously edenic, resolutely heterosexual populations of Africans and Amerindians. Through

⁷ Alexander's book (2005) was not available for the writing of this review essay.

her close analysis of parliamentary debates on the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 1991 in the Bahamas, Alexander finds “nostalgia for an idyllic Bahamas, free from Western decadent incursions, a Bahamas that was not peopled by lesbians and gay men” (1997, 85). An official discourse constructs homosexuality as a practice found outside of the region and one that has only contaminated Caribbean life in recent years. For queer-identified Caribbean people, it is a logic that creates a split between their sexual and their national/regional identities. Alexander gets to the heart of the conceptual problem of queerness in the Caribbean and beyond reactionary characterizations of Afrocentric mythologies of heteronormativity. Anticolonial nationalism, masculinity, and heteronormativity work together in constructing homosexuality as a category outside of the Caribbean even as it is legislated within national boundaries.

LaFont explores the claim of African heteronormativity from a historical perspective. She explains how tracing the sexual ideology of slaves to Africa is complicated by their ethnic diversity, since sexual ideology varied from one ethnic group to another. Although earlier anthropological studies considered same-sex relations to be a Western import to sub-Saharan Africa, more current research shows that many African cultures worked same-sex relations into a larger framework of heterosexuality. LaFont also sets up the importance of reading absences and silences in the research of Caribbean sexuality; the lack of “proof” of same-sex desire in historical records does not, she cautions us, reflect its nonexistence (2001, 38–40). At the same time, these relations cannot be forced into a model of gay and lesbian identities that emerged from the political, cultural, and social milieu of Western nations.

Gloria Wekker’s study of *mati* work among Surinamese working-class women disputes the presumed universality of Western sexual identities, particularly the heterosexual/homosexual divide. *Mati*, which is the patois word for “friend,” refers to the same-sex relationships into which Surinamese working-class women enter for pleasure. The “work” aspect of the relationship does not refer to an economic transaction so much as to a range of reciprocal exchanges in which the women engage. What is different about these women is that they do not identify themselves as lesbians because they are simultaneously engaged in relationships with the men who father their children. Wekker’s study disputes presuppositions about Caribbean sexuality on a number of levels. First, instead of working with the idea of men as the high sexual performers, it entertains the possibility of women “orchestrating their own sexual pleasures” (1999, 124). Second, the women exhibit a working-class moral code that is not rooted in middle-class values of respectability. Referring to the Surinamese proverb

“I am a gold coin,” Wekker argues that the women consider their value to remain the same no matter how much they “circulate” (1999, 123–24). Third, she sees in *mati* the more fluid principles of West African gender and sexuality, despite studies that conclude that the practice originated with the absence of men who engaged in gold mining and balata bleeding in the rain forest away from home (1997, 338). The Afro-Surinamese women who engage in *mati* work are not stigmatized, thus suggesting to Wekker a more heterogeneous sexuality than is permitted by the hetero-homosexual divide (1999, 131–34).

Elizabeth Crespo-Kebler’s “‘The Infamous Crime against Nature’: Constructions of Heterosexuality and Lesbian Subversions in Puerto Rico,” one of the more compelling essays in Lewis’s collection *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, locates Puerto Rican lesbian identities within “the dissonant and contradictory messages contained in the norms of heterosexuality they appear to negate” (Crespo-Kebler 2003, 190). Drawn from lesbian life stories collected in San Juan and New York between 1987 and 1994, the article traces the emergence of Puerto Rican lesbian feminism as a response to the 1974 expansion of the Puerto Rico Penal Code of 1902 to include lesbianism in its list of “crimes against nature” or “deviant” sexuality. Crespo-Kebler outlines how the Penal Code of 1902 rendered lesbianism outside of the language of the law, having no “act.” Working with Judith Butler’s notion of contingent rather than fixed lesbian identities, she argues that a repression of female sexuality paradoxically “provided spaces for women to define unnamable or unthinkable sexualities” (2003, 197).

Crespo-Kebler’s negotiated reading of the possibilities for lesbian identity in the repressive discourse of a Caribbean nation-state links back to Wekker’s articulation of how absences can create new versions of sexual identifications in local Caribbean sites. Crespo-Kebler discusses the shift from what she calls the first generation of lesbians born between the 1920s and 1940s to the second, who reached adolescence in the 1960s or 1970s. The former group is characterized as “inclined to construct alternatives for themselves out of very traditional spaces,” including within heterosexual marriage (Crespo-Kebler 2003, 198). Despite the private nature of their negotiations, the first generation’s sexuality was nonetheless visible to the second generation, who more openly identified themselves as lesbian. It was the revision of the Penal Code in 1974 to include women in the antisodomy laws that pushed many of the second-generation lesbians interviewed into political action.

Though Cooper’s, Wekker’s, and Crespo-Kebler’s readings of sexuality all question the saliency of gender and sexual identities defined through

the global North, they reach very different conclusions about how one can map a Caribbean sexuality on its own terms. Where Wekker and Crespo-Kebler suggest a continuum of sexual practices and identities as simultaneous expressions rather than static positions, Cooper's Jamaica is far more polarized into heterosexual and homosexual camps. Cooper accedes to the lure of the local, where what happens in the Caribbean must be right for the Caribbean. Wekker's and Crespo-Kebler's work on clarifying the difference between Caribbean sexuality and Western models of sexual identity relies on the local less as the negation of all things Western and more as a complex system of negotiating class, gender, and national histories.

Kaur Puar's work on the globalization of queer identities demonstrates the difficulty of separating local from globalized cultures (2001, 1040). Exploring what she characterizes as "the often tense relationships between the interest and effects of globalization and postcolonial gay and lesbian identities" (2002, 101), she outlines how the state discourse that Alexander so expertly deconstructs as heterosexist and masculinist is part and parcel of the queer tourist fantasy. "A culturally defined and driven homophobia," explains Puar, "does not, after all, deflect the lure of an exotic (queer) paradise; instead, it encourages a continuity of colonial constructions of tourism as a travel adventure into uncharted territory laden with the possibility of taboo sexual encounters, illicit seductions, and dangerous liaisons—a version of what Renato Rosaldo terms 'imperial nostalgia'" (Puar 2002, 113). Puar at once seeks to broaden the global scope of possible "queer Atlantic" (2002, 128) identities and alliances while remaining vigilantly skeptical of Western-based gay activist attempts to organize around saving queer-identified Caribbean citizens from their homophobic nations, exploiting the Caribbean as a primitive sexual site, or both (2002, 128). She calls for models of sexuality that address the complex history of sex in the Caribbean, ones that can account for not only colonialism and nationalism but also globalization. Any dismissal of sexuality as unimportant in the face of more pressing issues like globalization and poverty belies the foundational space it occupies in the formation of Caribbean nation-states.

Visibility in the debate over sexuality in the Caribbean public sphere belongs predominantly to male homosexuality, especially in the variety of linguistic-sexual terms that occupy popular cultural expression. The derogatory term for homosexuals in Jamaica, *battyman*, not only identifies gay men quite literally with the practice of anal sex ("batty" stands for "bottom") but also fixes the signification of homosexuality to a sexual act that is considered deviant, nasty, and un-Jamaican. With national identity

being so bound up with notions of sexual propriety, on the one hand, and narrowly defined masculinity, on the other, it is not surprising that sexuality, and in particular male homosexuality, remains a centerpiece of debates about Caribbean nationalities both locally and in the diaspora.

Thomas Glave's widely reprinted essay, "Toward a Nobility of the Imagination: Jamaica's Shame" (2000), remains a touchstone of personal and political statements on Caribbean sexuality.⁸ Glave, who is an American of Jamaican descent and cofounder of J-FLAG, has in many ways become the public face of a Jamaican queer identity. In Glave's "Between Jamaica(n) and (North) America(n): Convergent (Divergent) Territories" (2004) and Wesley E. A. Crichlow's "History, (Re)memory, Testimony and Biomythography: Charting a Buller Man's Trinidadian Past" (2004), the authors construct personal narratives of national, gender, and sexual identities to argue for lifting the taboo against masculine same-sex desire in the Caribbean. For Glave, the experience of being deemed a "chi chi man" as well as the potential for violence if caught characterize his relationship with his parents' homeland. He speaks of the harassment and physical threats enacted by the "Jamaican Heterosexuality Police" (2004, 129) and identifies American universities as a place where he learned to connect *queer* to *Caribbean*. In his vexed relationship to "home," Glave struggles with his performance of masculinity both in Jamaica and the United States. The narrative of Trinidadian-born Crichlow is even more explicitly a "story of pain and humiliation" within a country struggling with the legacies of colonialism and slavery (2004, 213). Both Glave and Crichlow identify the link between gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality as the particular intersection that characterizes the taboo nature of homosexuality in Caribbean culture, a conclusion echoed by Lewis's comprehensive overview, "Caribbean Masculinity: Unpacking the Narrative" (2003a).

Masculinity studies in the Caribbean is actually far from taboo—it has a long history of affecting social policy and national rhetoric. As Reddock outlines in her introduction to *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities*, the study of masculinity emerged out of a sociology of the family as a favorite national topic, in particular the popular "male marginalization" theory. Reddock and Patricia Mohammed have pioneered work that challenges the popular circulation of this theory, which "located concerns with masculinity at the heart of the postcolonial quest for upward social mobility, which for many Afro- and Indo-Caribbean people had been possible only

⁸ Glave's essay was written as an open letter to the people of Jamaica in response to Banton's dancehall hit "Boom By-By." It was published in two Kingston newspapers and has been widely reprinted.

through education” (Reddock 2004, xiv; see also Mohammed 2004). For Chevannes, the turn to masculinity is less about the institutionalization of gender studies in the academic arena and more a question of social policy and practice in the region.

Chevannes’s *Learning to Be a Man*, as the title suggests, focuses on the processes of gender socialization in the Caribbean and picks up on the same inextricable relationship between gender socialization and “(hetero)sexualization” that Glave and Crichlow locate as the producer of silence and/or ridicule surrounding homosexuality (Chevannes 2001, 214–15). Chevannes’s research in five Caribbean communities in Jamaica and Guyana yielded not just a binary split between homo- and heterosexuality but also an analysis of the “complex sexual relations” (2001, 199) that characterize even heterosexual relationships in the Caribbean. His thoughtful discussion of the family and (hetero)sexual structures that define Caribbean masculinity are a welcome break from research that takes heterosexuality as the invisible norm, even if homosexuality finds limited space in his formulation of “street” and “yard” culture (2001, 210). Perhaps the most interesting conclusion that Chevannes draws from his research is that the heterosexualization of Caribbean masculinity is so deeply entrenched in its culture that not just having “first sex” but having a child and/or setting up an independent household are the marks of reaching adulthood, more so than other social factors and events like jobs or education (2001, 214–15). This heterosexualization of masculinity, in Chevannes’s research, is the cornerstone of the socialization process in Caribbean culture.

Murray’s *Opacity: Gender, Sexuality, Race, and the “Problem” of Identity in Martinique* (2002) also contends that a heteronormative masculinity is central to racial and national identity in the Caribbean. His focus on the complicated and contradictory performances of masculinity within the French territory of Martinique emphasizes the pitfalls of strict data collection and takes into account state and cultural discourse as much as historical and legal practice. A white Canadian scholar, Murray not only acknowledges his outsider status in *Opacity* but also makes it integral to his central argument—namely, the perpetual opacity of compound identities. Building on Martinican Edouard Glissant’s (1989) replacement of the analytic transparency of ethnography with “opacity,” Murray wants to maintain the density of Caribbean social identifications rather than resolve their paradoxes. He acknowledges the full range and complexities of the problem of Caribbean sexual identity and asks that we be as creative in our solutions, including rethinking the heteronormative diagnosis of

identity as a “problem” in the first place, as the quotes around the word in his subtitle suggest.

Murray derives his analysis of the centrality of masculine sexual performance to Martinican identity from the culture itself, particularly carnival “as the ‘ur-text’ of disruptive activity” (2002, 18). He documents in these spaces varying degrees of willingness to perform outside of binary gender-sexual roles, even in quasi-public spaces like theater workshops or on the street. These flexible identities—for instance, a *gai* man who never comes out to his family but who also considers himself out in an urban queer community—challenge constructions of sexual identity as strictly individual while maintaining a public silence on queerness that feeds the taboo surrounding homosexuality (2002, 114). The dynamic and sometimes conflicting ways that men and masculinities engage in the rules of belonging at the local or official levels are what interest Murray, and *Opacity* struggles to keep its interpretations as flexible and complex as the various sites of cultural citizenship Murray documents. Carnival, in the end, is not where he finds the answer to the “problem” of identity. Rather, he urges us to think of popular and state-sanctioned performances as “culturally specific dialogues in which numerous identifications refract and interact, contributing to the making and unmaking of ideas about gender, sexuality, self and society” (2002, 148).

Murray details not just how carnival allows a space for homoerotic and cross-gender play in a strict gender-cultural system—one interviewee goes as far as to say, “You’d be amazed at what goes on between men during Carnival parties” (2002, 146)—but also how it reinscribes “the dominance of a discourse of normative male heterosexuality” (2002, 146). Murray’s pre-op transsexual interviewee, Denise, dresses in mourning during carnival, arguing that the festival “ma[kes] a mockery of her, and the fact that cross-dressing only occur[s] during Carnival, a time of play, reinforce[s] its unacceptability in daily life” (2002, 147). Not fetishizing any singular expression of gender-sexual identity alone, *Opacity* maps a network of often contradictory and not always binary performances as the nexus of Martinican identity and of Caribbean sexuality as a whole. The slight shift away from the problem/solution model may also signal a more significant merging of cultural studies with social science modes of inquiry, with a critical eye toward a recognition of the complicated and innovative ways that the Caribbean has defined and continues to redefine gender and sexuality.

In Rafael L. Ramírez’s “Masculinity and Power in Puerto Rico” (2003), the links among race, class, masculinity, and sexuality are reiterated in the

Spanish Caribbean context. Ramírez questions singular categories of masculinity, instead locating gender in Puerto Rico as complex performances of power. In this range of masculinities, Ramírez distinguishes between the *mongo* (“a man without power . . . considered weak, fearful, unfit to defend his ideas or posture on any issue”) and the *maricón* (“a man who assumes a passive role in anal intercourse with other men”; 2003, 246). By distinguishing between masculinity and homosexuality, Ramírez calls attention to both the complexity and severity of masculine norms, where even “the most unfortunate, despised, and devaluated Puerto Rican man considers himself superior to a maricón” (2003, 246). While Ramírez does not go into depth concerning the violent reaction to a homosexual label, he does call for more research “on the complex articulation between masculinity, power, and homoeroticism” (2003, 247), for tracking gay masculinity within its own context rather than simply in relation to heterosexuality.

Sean Lakasingh-Meighoo’s “Jahaji Bhai: Notes on the Masculine Subject and Homoerotic Subtext of Indo-Caribbean Identity” (2000) argues for the foundational relationship among masculinity, homoeroticism, and Indo-Caribbean identity. Lakasingh-Meighoo derives a theory of sexuality from Caribbean culture with the help of Western feminist analysis (here, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) in framing a debate with his diasporic Indian audience (2000, 79–80). Lakasingh-Meighoo looks for a subtext of homoeroticism in the culture of *jahaji bhai* (literally translated as “ship brothers”) as a privileged trope in academic discourse for Indo-Caribbean identity. Taking us comprehensively through existing scholarship on Indo-Caribbean culture, he notes that the supposedly gender-neutral term *jahaji bhai* in fact signifies a deep investment in the homosocial culture of Caribbean masculinity, from cricket to calypso (2000, 85–86).

Lakasingh-Meighoo reads the potential subtext of homoeroticism and queer desire into the central trope of Indo-Caribbean identity. In a logic akin to LaFont’s argument about African sexualities and historiography, he forcefully dismantles any scholarly excuses for the near-total absence of a discussion of same-sex practices in this body of scholarship and relocates queer desire at Indo-Caribbean culture’s “very origins—indentureship, the traumatic rupture that inaugurates the Indo-Caribbean subject into history” (2000, 88). Lakasingh-Meighoo argues that the conditions of indentureship—the nearly all-male labor force during the early years of migration—produced strong bonds that may have also been sexual. The radical break from conventional Indo-Caribbean scholarship that Lakasingh-Meighoo notes, then, is through the claim “that *jahaji bhai* already contains a queer quality, and always has” (2000, 89). Such a bold reading of the historical formation of an Indo-Caribbean identity throws down the gauntlet for

future work in the emerging field of Indo-Caribbean scholarship, from monographs to the construction of anthologies, not just for the marginal inclusion of queer subjects but for same-sex desire's centrality to the formation of identity as such.

Two full-length texts and a handful of articles have begun to address the local silence concerning Indo-women's gender and sexual identities as well as to think about the interethnic difference and alliances erased in much previous scholarship on the Caribbean, which assumed an Afro-centric perspective. Indo-Caribbeans actually comprise a large portion of the region's population, particularly in Trinidad and Guyana, where nearly 50 percent of the population is of East Indian descent. Transported to the islands after the abolition of slavery as "coolie," or indentured labor, Indo-Caribbeans offer a rich history for gender scholars. Although male workers dominated the early years of "coolie" migration, the few women who traveled were made the subject of intense sexual scrutiny across the South Asian diaspora. Subsumed within Afro-identified independence struggles through the mid-twentieth century and within discussions of South Asians emigrating to the West, Indo-Caribbeans were left off the critical map by contemporary feminist scholars until recently. Critics such as Puri and Mehta, and before them Tejaswini Niranjana (1997), have begun to address the previously unacknowledged subject of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality.

In the last chapter of *The Caribbean Postcolonial*, Puri finds in the public controversy of soca musical performance in Trinidad a window into reconsidering the place of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality. In the 1990s, Indo-Caribbean women began to take up chutney-soca—a mix of Indian musical and vocal styles with Afro-identified soca music, a calypso with Indo-Caribbean beats and content. When Drupatee Ramgoonai became chutney-soca's premiere performer with a song that was both sexually explicit and expressly political about violence against women, the popular press could not get enough of debating her place in Indo-diasporic and Caribbean gender representation, citing her as "vulgar" and "immoral" (Puri 2004, 250). As in Alexander's argument about the repressive politics of the nation-state, Puri's work on Drupatee outlines how Indian national identity is also constituted through a policing of the boundaries of sexuality, this time in relation to Afro-Caribbean hypersexuality. Here, some of the same discourses used to characterize homosexuality in past scholarship, that of contamination from the West, were used to describe Indian women "entering a stereotypically imagined 'African' or Creole domain of vice and sexuality" (Puri 2004, 196). Puri locates Drupatee as a new vanguard for Indo-Caribbean women, seeing great possibility in her fem-

inist protest of violence against women as well as in her related call for *douglaness*, the unacknowledged mixing of Afro and Indo cultures and peoples. She argues that the public reception of the song, and of interracial and sexual contact, “subordinates class, feminist, and formal and aesthetic considerations to a racial-cultural nationalist agenda” (Puri 2004, 204), a move frequently noted by Indo-feminist scholars.

If this new scholarship on Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality is still trying to enunciate the intricacies of race, ethnicity, colonialism, nation, and violence, then it is doing so through a commitment to the significance of cultural expressions. Mehta’s *Diasporic (Dis)Locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the “Kala Pani”* seeks simultaneously to establish, celebrate, and complicate Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality. *Kala pani* denotes a community of Indian-identified women, this time referring to “the Indian women who braved the treacherous waters of the Atlantic” to come to the Caribbean (2004, 4). Mehta highlights the historical realities of diasporic sexuality and its promise of “a certain sexual ‘freedom’ among women, a freedom to dictate their own terms of availability or inaccessibility to multiple male partners” (2004, 5). As does Puri, Mehta critiques the Afrocentric focus of Caribbean feminism by suggesting *douglaness*, hybridity, and mobility as the particular mix that a consideration of Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality can bring to the research table.

Diasporic (Dis)Locations concludes with its most salient argument, which is to reconsider the meaning of gendered violence in the formation of sexual identity and cultural discourse in the Caribbean. Mehta points to the silence that surrounds the high incidence of prostitution, suicide, battering, and wife murder among Indo-Caribbean women. Exploring how gendered violence is addressed in the fiction of a number of notable Indo-Caribbean women writers, including the Toronto-based lesbian novelist and poet Shani Mootoo, she revisits some of the foundational concerns that this review essay has laid out. Mehta begins her chapter by outlining the culturally specific ways in which Indo-Caribbean women’s sexuality has been “inscribed within a particular culture of violence and shame” and has been “associated with a series of taboos and restrictions imposed by male-ordered strategies of confinement and inhibition” (2004, 192). In what she characterizes as an “onerous task” (2004, 226), she considers how these divergent authors (from poets to novelists, in the Caribbean or abroad) represent challenges to the “Brahmanic and Victorian moralities” that have characterized discussions of Indian sexuality (2004, 193). She argues that national and diasporic legacies of repression and invisibility haunt Indo-Caribbean women and the cultural texts they produce.

Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* and her collection of short stories *Out on Main Street* ground Mehta's chapter in more than just the heteronormative limits of state discourse and Indian diasporic culture. Mehta argues that Mootoo's articulation of queer Caribbean identity locates a "correlation between the repression of queer sexuality and the colonial oppression of race and culture in the Caribbean and Canada[,] expos[ing] the patriarchal ideology of conflating questions of identity into a singularly masculine voice" (2004, 218). To speak of a lesbian identity, then, is to expose the nexus of colonial and nationalist discourses that creates limited categories of what constitutes the ideal or even visible Indo-Caribbean citizen. It is also, for Mehta, a question of reconfiguring "home" in a broader geographic scope, as Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality is taken outside the borders of not just India but the Caribbean itself (2004, 218). Beyond the interweaving of sexuality and the state that we have seen in most of the recent scholarship, Mehta pushes into a discussion of sexuality and diasporic Caribbean identity, where "diasporic communities reconfigure themselves around issues of gender, whereby the community maintains its cultural identity through migrating notions of gender-role conformity" (2004, 209). Optional exile or relocation, like that of Mootoo herself, does not escape the gender-sexual complexes of Caribbean identity but magnifies them. New research on Caribbean sexuality might use *Diasporic (Dis)Locations* as a model for the complex ways that the transnational makeup of Caribbean culture is constitutive of the region's history.

Attention to the previously neglected contribution of Indo-Caribbeans to notions of Caribbeanness continues the trend of linking transnationalism with sexuality and complicating the racial-ethnic landscape that has particularly characterized Anglophone Caribbean scholarship. Moving beyond the taboos of Victorian and nationalist discourses, studies of Caribbean sexuality have taken on the heterogeneity of the region while addressing its place in a global economy. The range of work discussed throughout this review essay reflects the complex ways that the transnational makeup of Caribbean culture occurs both in its history and in its present diasporic scope. This rich culture, rather than indicating the need for a recovery of some pure, precontact past, is in fact created at the intersection of global capital, political identities, and personal desires that characterize Caribbean sexuality today.

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