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Sexual desires, rights and regulation

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Sex has been at the heart of the Caribbean experience at least from the moment of colonial encounter. (It may have well been at the heart of the pre-colonial Caribbean experience too, but we don't yet seem to know enough to confidently make this claim). Anxieties and fears about the sexual proclivities of the region's Indigenous peoples, and later, the African and Indian migrants brought in to labour the land, haunted the imaginations of colonialism's agents. European colonizers feared that the sexual desires of these Others, as well as their desires *for* Others, would result in interracial sex and reproduction and ultimately threaten notions of white racial purity. Regulation of sexual desires and practices was therefore a key component of processes of colonization, and forcefully institutionalized through laws governing family structure, partnerships, prostitution and sex. In the aftermath of official European retreat from much of the region, this determined disciplining of sex was not relaxed. Instead, post-independence reforms often further restricted sexual diversity and liberty, and the regulation of sexuality proliferated as new national and regional forms of governmentality developed across the Caribbean.

A critically important workshop on Caribbean Feminism in Toronto in 2006 led myself, Tracy Robinson and others present to focus on the absence of a broad and sustained discussion about sexualities, sexual rights and their relationship to local and global political transformations as reflected in Caribbean scholarship. Although Caribbean feminists like M. Jacqui Alexander (*Pedagogies of Crossing*), Gloria Wekker (*The Politics of Passion*) and Kamala Kempadoo (*Sexing the Caribbean*), among others, had shaped theoretical frameworks to engage the kind of critical reflection, research and political action we believed were needed on questions of sexual rights, cultures and citizenship in the region, little advance was being made in research and governance institutions and, it sometimes seemed, even in the organization of political action on the

ground. From that moment, Ms. Robinson and I began to plot a way to bring together scholars and rights activists from the region to have preliminary conversations which, we hoped, would be catalysts for collaboration, research and political work. When we reached out to various institutional actors for support in organizing such an event, we were cautioned by many that the issue was too controversial for funders to consider supporting, and some urged us to “make it about HIV and AIDS”; *then*, they said, funding would flow. We refused this route, insistent that our concerns included but certainly stretched beyond health panics about HIV and AIDS. In late 2007, UNIFEM stepped up to the plate, and with the assistance of the UWI Cave Hill Law Faculty, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and some researchers’ commitments of their own research funds, a two-day workshop materialized, focusing on the theme “Sexualities in Conversation: Rights and Regulation in the Anglo-Caribbean”; it was held on February 15 and 16, 2008, in Bridgetown. Exchanges at that workshop would lead to this proposal for a special “Sexualities” edition of this journal, which was warmly received and supported by its Board.

The essays collected in this volume provide an indication of some of the activities, insights and questions disturbing the often quiet compliance with the heteronormative models of citizenship and social organization that were introduced at and have been institutionalized since the beginning of colonization of the Caribbean region. Contributors from English-, Dutch-, Spanish- and French-speaking parts of the region turn their attention to a number of events and issues in the collection. Yasmin Tambiah recalls Alexander’s seminal examination of sexual citizenship in Trinidad, and uncovers new insights into how postcolonial states use law to refine sexual norms in their constitution of nation. Some scholars provide glimpses into the complex sexual cultures of Caribbean communities, such as David Murray’s examination of Barbados’ “nebulous queens”, and Dwaine Plaza and Amar Wahab’s ethnography of queer-identified Caribbean immigrants in Canada. Four contributors—Tara Atluri, Tanya Saunders, Robert Carr and Anthony Lewis—reveal how nationalist struggles about sexuality inhabit and are negotiated in forms of Caribbean popular culture, and two activists—Colin Robinson and Akim Ade Larcher—weigh in on controversial transnational campaigns targeting one form claimed to be particularly productive of homophobia, Jamaican dancehall. Vanessa Agard-Jones and Rinaldo Walcott trouble diasporic claims for sexual rights being made on behalf of Caribbean people, from outside the region, while Jasbir Puar revisits her previous fieldwork in Trinidad, and many of the questions outlined in this volume, to consider how certain queer subjectivities may be induced through tropes of nationalism. Finally, Gloria Wekker shares her frank and compelling insights about some of the core matters underlying all these discussions: pleasure, desire, happiness, love.

Throughout the volume, authors face and engage multiple tensions that surround the production of sexual identity and the regulation of sexual practices, and critically consider some longstanding, but problematic claims about these processes in the contemporary Caribbean. Although the original call for papers was broadly defined, all contributions published here share a strong focus on transnational circuits of exchange. Many of them consider how “local” struggles for sexual rights and “local” ideas about

liberty and personhood in the Caribbean interact with, inform and are also informed by Euro-American-centred concepts of identity. As gay activists, Robinson and Larcher, for example, share some important political commitments but hold quite different attitudes toward the engagement of North American and European gay activists in Caribbean struggles; whereas Larcher sees promise in deepening international collaboration, Robinson warns against what Walcott refers to herein as their “white queer homonormative racism”. Agard-Jones, too, is similarly suspicious of some forms of transnational activism in French Caribbean territories. Murray’s study of Barbados queens offers us perhaps the most telling truth about the Caribbean’s sexual cultures and modes of sexual regulation. Contesting dominant depictions of the region as a uniformly homophobic space, or as one that merely takes cues from outside in negotiating sexual cultures, he concludes that Barbados’ ‘sexscape’ “is neither an illustration of a ‘creolized’, ‘hybrid’ culture, nor is it a ‘pluralistic’ compendium of multiple, discrete cultures”, but rather “illustrate[s] the ongoing tension between differentially located and produced subjectivities and values, which are pieced together in myriad, contextually shifting ways.” We must foreground this complexity if we are to deepen current knowledge and analysis of Caribbean sexualities.

Numerous shifts have taken place since the seeds of this special edition were planted, illustrating the complexity of Caribbean sexualities and their attendant politics and activism: For example, in the short period of time that has passed since the Caribbean Feminism workshop of 2006, a number of actions by activists working from within and outside the Caribbean, and publication of several scholarly and fictional collections (e.g. *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Gay and Lesbian Writing* [2008], *Sex, Power and Taboo* [2009] and *Sexuality Social Exclusion and Human Rights* [2009]), have multiplied conversations about Caribbean sexualities, and fostered hope that a better understanding of the region’s complex sexual history and contemporary sexual cultures will emerge along with, perhaps, a greater security of sexual rights and citizenship. Although punitive laws governing homosexuality continue to exist in most of the region, more calls are being made to repeal these and other measures restrictive of sexual liberty. Earlier this year (2009), for example, St. Lucia’s Constitutional Review Commission heard from three health and rights advocates making the case for law reforms protecting sexual minorities. Although their testimony has been repeatedly televised and published, there has apparently been little public outcry to protest such proposed changes. When Trinidad and Tobago’s Minister of Gender Affairs declared her government would not entertain discussions about sexual rights, a coalition of activists formed the Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO) which has since organized a range of activities demanding the repeal of anti-sodomy legislation. As evidenced by the positive media coverage the group has received—including very supportive editorials from several newspapers—significant headway is being made. In Guyana, the Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD) is pursuing a range of activities—a film festival, legal strategies, health initiatives—toward the safety and security of marginalized sexual subjects.

Regionally too, there is compelling evidence of a political shift. At its 39th General Assembly, held this past July in Honduras, the Organization of American States approved its second resolution on “Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity” which

included a motion “to condemn acts of violence and related human rights violations committed against individuals because of their sexual orientation and gender identity”. Such positive developments are, however, accompanied by active and well-funded organized resistance to these efforts—such as those by the North American-based Christian Legal Fellowship. Nonetheless, claims for the regard and observation of sexual rights as human rights are clearly on the table in most Caribbean states, with an increasing boldness and authority that had perhaps not previously been seen. There are too many other developments to list here, but suffice it to say that change is afoot throughout the Caribbean in relation to sexualities, sexual rights and citizenship. The need for ongoing critical analysis and research into these changes is more important than ever.