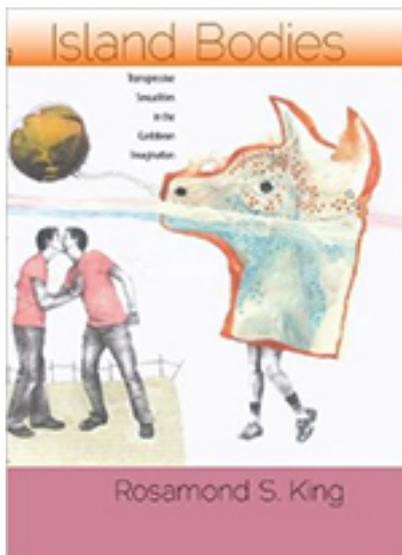


***Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* by Rosamond S. King**

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The “Caribglobal” is Rosamond King’s wonderful contribution to new ways of languaging Caribbean culture. “Caribglobal” extracts itself from the popular and ubiquitous framings of globalization and transnationalism to define “areas, experiences, and individuals within both the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora” (3). Rosamond King wants to get at the specificities of Caribbean identities and finding that these larger conceptualizations often miss the people themselves, she brings her lens into close focus to get at this definition. Deriving its inspiration from local colloquialisms, like “foreign-local,” which bring together seeming opposites, her definition of “Caribglobal” performs a similar function. In this formation, the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora are not oppositional categories, but mutually constitutive of each other.

Besides this wonderful entry point, as her subtitle—*Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination*—indicates, this book pluralizes the meanings of sexuality in the Caribbean. Its primary titling, *Island Bodies*, thus performs a dual function of accounting for physical bodies, often used primarily for labor, but also for the sexual bodies themselves, used for pleasure. In her words, she is describing both the “human bodies from Caribbean islands and the islands themselves” (2). So, far from being a reworking of “small space” logics, *Island Bodies*, with its “caribglobal” approach, is much more expansive than many other works on the Caribbean. It moves skillfully beyond the popular Anglophone Caribbean as site of study to include discussion of the Dutch, French, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

But there is a further deft move here. Whereas earlier works on Caribbean sexuality tend to be gender-specific, Rosamond King gives herself the space to explore a range of identities and transgressive sexualities. While sexuality is ubiquitous in Caribbean culture, scholarship has continued to subordinate it, even if the marketing of sexuality is perhaps one of the most popular framings of the Caribbean. So in tourist-targeted representations, the Caribbean is a place of “sun, sex, and gold,” as Kamala Kempadoo (1999), editor of a collection of essays on sex tourism, referred to it, or “sun, sex, and sea” in popular discourse, with heterosexuality still the perceived norm. But is it really? This question is what this work attempts to explore and does so successfully in five chapters, engaging her theme of transgressive sexualities from many angles.

This first book to provide a “Caribglobal” reading of sexuality in and out of the Caribbean furthers the categories indicated by Kempadoo, which the writer cites, or Faith Smith’s edited volume *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* (2011), in which the writer’s work was included. It is both a frontrunner of a new body of scholarship on sexuality in the Caribbean *and* a study of Caribbean literature and culture that uses sexuality as its primary lens. *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* performs multiple moves as it advances our understandings of what is Caribbean and who are the contemporary Caribbean writers. It moves beyond nation-state-specific readings—valuable as these are—of gay sexuality in Cuba (Allen) or Surinam (Wekker). In this process literature is critical for King. She writes, “As a product of the Carib-global imagination, literature helps us to see some of the ways sexuality is imagined in the region and the diaspora, both as it is, and how it could be” (13).

One of the author’s imperatives is to claim “imagination” as a methodological tool. And this she does successfully. The Afterword spends a bit of time justifying this claim. Still, I am troubled that the historical intervention by Thomas Glave, “Toward a Nobility of the Imagination: Jamaica’s Shame”—an open letter to the people of Jamaica, reprinted in the journal *Small Axe* (2000) and his anthology *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent* (2005)—was, when first published perhaps the only public challenge to Jamaican homophobia. Additionally it was the kind of public call to the intellectual community that helped to clear the space precisely for “imagination” as a trope that could be used in other ways, even critiqued for its limitations. The kind of scholarly work on Caribbean sexualities that is now more easily pursued by subsequent scholars and activists had no open presence then. Glave’s essay was, when published, indeed part of his activist-intellectual work which accompanied the founding of J-FLAG (Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, 1998). Given *Island Bodies*’s early assertion of the “Caribglobal,” Glave’s argument is precisely within that same “Caribglobal” framework of the radical imagination that the writer asserts with its ability to be both fully inside and outside the Caribbean. Thus while it has value in terms of claiming more space for cultural performance, King’s conclusion that “instead of demanding a ‘noble’ imagination” she would prefer to recognize “the breadth of imagination that already exists” (198), can be also seen as not

recognizing the full meaning and intent of Glave's intervention.

Nonetheless, Rosamond King provides an optimistic understanding of contemporary Caribbean sexualities, asserting:

There is an abundance of evidence both of transgressive Caribbean sexualities and “native understandings” of these desires throughout Caribbean history and culture, in every era, and in every part of the region and its diaspora (196)...But in Caribglobal communities, all of these people appear and are more often than not tolerated and, to various degrees, accepted. (197)

What allows the author to make such an optimistic claim? First of all, she too is a scholar/activist who has been involved in the creation of projects that examine Caribbean sexualities and who progressively asserts the rights of oppressed and marginalized groups.

In *Island Bodies*, she pays particular attention to detail as revealed in chapters that provide rich analyses of literary and popular culture. For example, her Chapter One, “The Caribbean Trans Continuum and Backhanded Re/Presentation,” uses “trans” as a conceptual framing, finding that the popularly used “transgender” in the U.S. is still male-identified and not in keeping with local languaging for people who transgress the instituted binaries. Reading through novels such as Puerto Rican Mayra Santos Febres's *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000), Jamaican Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1996), and Trinidadian-Canadian Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), King explores “Caribbean Trans Characters in Literature,” but then takes us, in another section on “Transvestism in Caribbean Festivals,” to look specifically at two major representations of trans-characterization in carnival culture. Those familiar with *jouvert* (*jouvay*) carnival in Trinidad know, however, that there are several other festival/carnival representations she could have chosen. Yet, this is one of the strengths of this work: that it allows or prompts a series of other associations or examples.

An even more significant contribution is her reading of Franz Fanon's ambiguous and often identified-as-dismissive *macomère* references that she calls “backhanded.” Her point here eventually is that Fanon himself performs a dual function of recognition and mis-recognition. But in presenting *trans* characters, she asserts that the writers themselves are able to challenge Fanon's “failure of the imagination.” Importantly, King ends with a related discussion of recent Caribbean legal cases involving trans issues, providing the kind of cross-cultural interdisciplinarity that is valued and gives this work tangible currency in the public sphere.

A repeated thread that runs through *Island Bodies* is the ongoing debunking of the “myth of exceptional Caribbean homophobia” (82). Two subsequent chapters function as mirror reflections of constructed invisibilities. They deal with male and female sexuality respectively, articulated here as “El Secreto Abierto: Visibility, Confirmation and Caribbean

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Men Who Desire Men” and “‘This Is You’: ‘Invisibility’, Community and Women who Desire Women.” It is significant that King creates a titular balance between these two chapters, in putting “women who desire women” alongside or parallel to “men who desire men.” Moving against the legendary “invisibility” narrative particularly for same-sex loving women, she spends some time examining how “invisibility” and “near-invisibility” become tropes in creating a kind of absence/presence. In the end, the activist organizations King documents across the Caribbean provide important counter-narratives, as do the creative works of writers like Dionne Brand and Patricia Powell, the scholarship of Gloria Wekker on *mati* in Surinam, and the increasing number of self-identified Caribbean writers represented in *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (2008).

The last two chapters deal with more common, but different forms of transgressive sexuality. While the final chapter examines interracial relationships and includes sex tourism and the way the Caribbean is exoticized in film and literature, one of my favorite chapters is her “Force Ripe: Caribbean Women’s Sexual Agency.” Playing wonderfully with a Caribbean phrase that covers both fruits and women in the sense of premature harvesting or hastening before their normal readiness, she defines still a certain sexual agency as rebellion that is expressed not only in the literature, but in the personages of a range of popular performers. From Rihanna (Barbadian artist), Drupatee (Queen of Chutney), Alison Hinds (Soca Queen in Trinidad), Ivy (Queen of Reggaeton), and Jocelyn Berouard (Queen of Zouk), we get a rich panoply of Caribbean women who claim the stage with a “publicly open” transgressive sexuality as part of their cultural self-presentations. Given the range of possibilities, one can continue to add several other names to this list. Calypso Rose of Tobago instantly comes to mind, as exemplified in Lyndon Gill’s “Calypso Rose’s Phallic *Palet* and the Sweet Treat of Erotic Aurality” (2012). The framework created here gives us enough room to begin different discussions about public performance and the way that the body of Caribbean women is misread, but also the ways that they themselves use their bodies to challenge normative understandings of sexuality.

Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination gives us a new and richly nuanced reading of contemporary Caribbean culture, with readings of literary texts often passed over or read without full realization of the range of submerged meanings they contain. With an admirable demonstration of cross-cultural transdisciplinarity, this work expands the library of Caribbean Studies, of sexualities, and of African Diaspora literary and cultural studies.

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