



The University of  
the West Indies  
Centre for Gender and  
Development Studies



Issue 3 – 2009

## **Bajan Queens, Nebulous Scenes: Sexual Diversity in Barbados**

*David A.B. Murray*

---

### **Abstract**

This article has three objectives: 1) to provide a brief and partial overview of the complex socio-sexual terrain of Barbados, primarily from the perspective of Barbadian (Bajan) “queens” (effeminate homosexual men, some of whom dress and act like women), such documentation being necessary given the paucity of social science research that currently exists on same-gender sexuality in the Caribbean; 2) to analyze how and why a particular sexual subject position—the queen—appears to occupy a marginally acceptable and relatively visible position in Bajan public culture while normatively gendered “gay”-identified individuals are denigrated and absent in this domain; and 3) to analyze how and why Bajan sexual subjects like “gays” and “queens” do not mirror Euro-American sexual subjectivities and their relationships to hegemonic socio-sexual values. Particularly relevant in the Bajan sexscape are racialized intersections of gender and class structured through discourses of respect and reputation.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

One does not have to look far these days to find a position on sexual alterity in the Caribbean. For once, popular culture and academia are, for the most part, in agreement on this topic: The Caribbean is generally depicted as a region whose peoples are not tolerant of homosexuality (Reddock 2004). Men are socialized to think of any form of effeminacy or “soft” behavior as weak and deplorable—accusations of “battyman,” chichi man, buller, macoume, or anti-man are considered to be the worst insults possible (Chevannes 2001, Crichlow 2004, Dann 1987, Lewis 2003, Murray 2002). Certain genres of Caribbean music are gaining an international reputation for being aggressively homophobic (Gutzmore 2004, Mohammed 2004). Caribbean social and political organization has been identified as heteronormative and patriarchal (Alexander 1997, Kempadoo 2004). To sum up, it appears that any expression of sexuality outside patriarchal heterosexuality is uniformly unwelcome.

On the other hand, the long-term and widespread presence of sexual diversity in the Caribbean is increasingly well documented and analyzed (i.e. Glave 2008, Kempadoo 2004, Murray 2002, Padilla 2007, Wekker 2006). From my first visit to Barbados in 1998 until my most recent one in 2009, I have readily found evidence of this diversity: A few days after arriving in Barbados for the first time, my friend Joyce<sup>2</sup>, a heterosexual woman in her 60s who owns a rumshop and lives in Brockton<sup>3</sup>, a working-class section of Bridgetown, introduced me to her dressmaker, Cynthia, who lived in her own small home a few blocks away and later told me that “us queens have been here forever, darling.” At that time, based on Cynthia’s appearance and self-description as “always thinking of myself as a lady,” I assumed that “queen” was a local term equivalent to the popular Euro-American sexual term (male to female) “transgender.” Cynthia was well known on her street, and neighbors would often drop by or shout hello through her open window as they passed by during our chats.

On a subsequent visit in 2002, I began to see references in the local newspapers to a group named “United Gays and Lesbians Against AIDS in Barbados” (UGLAAB). I met and interviewed the founder and President at that time, Darcy Dear, who described how he had owned and managed a bar in Brockton for “queens, gays and lesbians” that had been in existence for at least 20 years. Due to increasing challenges and problems

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: Funding for this research was provided by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Standard Research Grant and York University Faculty of Arts Research Grants. Many thanks to the staff and faculty of the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute for Social and Economic Studies at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, for their support. Thank you also to Jillian Ollivierre for her superb research assistance. Andil Gosine, Rinaldo Walcott, Kamala Kempadoo, Andy Taitt, and Tracy Robinson have been wonderful interlocutors throughout the development of this article. The opinions and arguments expressed here are my own, and do not necessarily reflect those of my interlocutors. My greatest debt is to Joyce, whose support, generosity and kindness know no bounds.

<sup>2</sup> I met and became friends with Joyce while I was living in Washington DC and dating her brother, whom she visited regularly.

<sup>3</sup> Brockton is a fictitious name. In addition, all but two names in this article are also pseudonyms. Because of their public visibility and leadership positions within UGLAAB, I could not disguise Didi and Darcy’s identities. They consented to having their real names used in this research.

brought about through the HIV epidemic she<sup>4</sup> had felt compelled to start up UGLAAB, which was dedicated to supporting people with HIV/AIDS and educating Bajans (Barbadians) about the virus. Throughout our conversations, Darcy would interchangeably refer to himself as gay or a queen, which confused me at the time based on my understandings of these terms derived through my experiences as a white, North American, gay-identified male. In North America, “gay” and “transgendered” communities are popularly thought of as distinct groups based on their different sexual and gendered orientations (Valentine 2007). At that time, I thought that Darcy’s usage of these terms indicated the possibility of at least two or more queer communities existing in Barbados, transgender and gay/lesbian, and that perhaps she was telling me how she felt comfortable in both groups.

During that same visit, one afternoon I was walking down Broad Street, one of the main commercial avenues in Bridgetown, and as I passed by one of the high-end jewelry stores I saw behind the counter a person whom I assumed to be male judging from his outfit—a suit and tie—but the suit was bright red, the tie an iridescent blue, and a multicolored silk scarf was artfully arranged in the breast pocket. Furthermore, this “male” was clearly wearing makeup. Through Darcy, I found out that this was Didi, another self-identified “queen” who later told me she was “well-known to everyone” because she and two other queens did weekly drag shows at hotels and bars around the island, and she was also the multiple award-winning flag bearer of a Kadooment band (street band) for the annual Cropover Festival, Barbados’ equivalent of Carnival. Didi became the president of UGLAAB in 2003, and was often quoted in newspaper articles discussing HIV and gay-related issues.

However, it would be wrong to assume that these queens’ visibility in working-class neighborhoods, commercial streets, hotels, media, and support groups translates to a social environment celebrating sexual diversity. As I will discuss in more detail below, discrimination and harassment, ranging from being denied housing to verbal epithets and physical violence, are part of everyday life for many queens, and many feel that life in Barbados has become more difficult for them over the past 20–25 years. Indeed, as I have written elsewhere, recent local media coverage of most issues pertaining to sexual diversity (in Barbados or abroad) has been, for the most part, negative and critical (Murray 2006). Nevertheless, the presence of queens, some of whom refer to themselves as gay, in the public culture of Barbados was notable and certainly renders problematic the above depictions of uniform regional homophobia.

This Bajan “sexscape” (to coin a term from Appadurai [1996]) was also notable for the almost complete absence or invisibility of what I would have labeled “gay men” (again, based on my North American experiences and understanding of this term) in public, activist, and/or community leadership domains. In other words, I became curious about

---

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article I will use alternating gendered pronouns and adjectives (he/she, his/her) when discussing the queens as a means to more accurately represent their own shifting gendered and sexual self-descriptions between “gay” and “queen.” As I elaborate below, terms like “gay” and “transgendered” are problematic as sexual descriptors due to their hegemonic Euro-American origins, which, when applied to the queens’ narratives, do not comfortably embody these gendered/sexual subjectivities.

the absence of self-identified gay men—based on my Euro-American definition of “gay” as gender normative males with same sex desires—in Bajan public culture. While I met many self-identified gays and lesbians who attended the UGLAAB meetings, Darcy’s bar in Brockton, and semi-private parties around the island, most were discreet and carefully managed their bodies, clothing styles, and language in ways that conformed with gendered and hetero-normative standards in public domains such as the street, workplace and/or school. While Darcy and Didi were quasi-regular figures in the newspapers and were often identified as representatives of Barbados’ “gay” community, not once did I see a photo or name of a gender normative gay man or lesbian woman. While the occasional letter to the editor, column, or caller on a radio talk show would support gay and lesbian rights, they would do so anonymously, clarify their sexual orientation as heterosexual, or avoid any reference to their own sexual orientation.

Thus it appeared that queer activism in Barbados was facing a challenge that was directly inverse to that of queer communities in North America: While the latter have made significant progress in achieving lesbian and gay rights and becoming acceptable/accepted in public domains, transgendered people are still struggling to be accepted as equals within both the wider society and the queer community. In Barbados, it *appears* that transgendered individuals have achieved greater public acceptance, or at the very least are more publicly visible, and they are at the forefront of queer community organization and activism whereas lesbians and gays appear to be the problematic group who are less socially acceptable and visible and are not well-integrated into the queer community of Barbados. Thus, the obvious question would appear to be how and why this situation has come to exist in Barbados. How and why is it that transgendered people are visible and relatively socially accepted in public culture while gays and lesbians remain relatively invisible and problematic?

But what if I am asking the wrong question, or at least setting up the question with a series of problematic assumptions? What if my definitions of “gay” and “transgender” are not synonymous with the Bajans who describe themselves as “gay” and “queen”? What if Bajan sexual diversity or the Bajan “sexscape” is organized in ways that partially overlap or are co-constitutive with hegemonic queer Euro-American discourses of identity, community, and activism, while its practices and identities are refracted through other discursive socio-cultural, political, and economic influences generated locally and transnationally? In the rest of this article, I pursue this possibility, arguing that while sexual diversity in Barbados is immersed in, partially productive of, and produced through contemporary Euro-American gendered and sexual politics and identities (which are produced and circulated through mobile bodies of tourists, workers, lovers and relatives, communications technologies, and liberal democratic political and economic policies), this diversity is simultaneously produced through and in relation to local and regional gendered and sexual identity politics. Such politics requires us to acknowledge the ongoing influence of a colonized past, and its attendant classed, racialized, and cultural dynamics that produce unstable, unpredictable, multiple possibilities of sexual subjectivities. I argue that this sexscape is neither an illustration of a “creolized” or “hybrid” culture, nor is it reflective of a “pluralistic” compendium of multiple, discrete cultures, since both of these theoretical approaches risk oversimplification, as noted by

Slocum and Thomas in their excellent historical review of Caribbean anthropology, These approaches tend either to emphasize separate, unintegrated cultural communities existing alongside each other (pluralism), implying an incompatible and dysfunctional socio-cultural system, or they emphasize how Caribbean societies have produced a singular culture that seamlessly blends together the influences of their diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, thus often obscuring ongoing significant cultural, class, and racial hierarchies (Slocum and Thomas 2003; see also Palmie 2006).

Rather, I suggest that the queens' understandings of themselves, their controversial visibility, and the relative invisibility of gays and lesbians reflect subjectivities and positionalities that reflect an ongoing tension between differentially located and produced subjectivities and values. The latter are pieced together in myriad, contextually shifting ways by individuals who are marginalized by virtue of their non-heteronormative desires and identifications, resulting in contextually produced, potentially multiple subject positions (albeit within limits imposed through economic, racial, gendered and other social structures of inequality). This argument is influenced by Tom Boellstorff's notion of "dubbing culture" to explain the formation of contemporary Indonesian "lesbi and gay" subjectivities (2003). Dubbing culture challenges the "global gay" argument which posits that "traditional" sexual cultures, mostly located in the developing world, are adopting Euro-American gender-normative gay and lesbian sexual identities. Boellstorff's analysis emphasizes how Indonesians have learned about these identifications primarily through the international media, but have reworked them as they adopt them for themselves. The "dub" concept is taken from the filmic process whereby a film's original soundtrack is replaced by a version in another language, resulting in a juxtaposition where speech and gesture never fully match: "the seams show" (2003:236). Gay and lesbi Indonesians are thus engaged in a process of bricolage that cannot be fully defined or conceptualized in terms of traditional origins, as neither the origins nor their outcomes are ever fully stable. While Boellstorff focuses on how dubbing culture can be productively applied to thinking through the influence of Western sexual subject positions in non-Western places, the Barbadian sexscape differs in one crucial sense—it has never not been Western. In fact, as many have noted, it may be considered to be part of a region that is the crucible of "Western modernity" as we know it today (Abdur-Rahman 2006; Kempadoo 2004; Slocum and Thomas 2003). Furthermore, as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman argues, we cannot understand modern Western epistemologies of sexuality without acknowledging their co-formation with racial theories supporting coercive regimes of race-based social stratification deployed throughout colonial empires (2006, 223). In other words, the homosexual and the heterosexual, and their deeply gendered characteristics, were and are defined by and through whiteness, blackness, and the various ethno-racial categories in between. Thus a person like myself, who is identified as a "middle-class gay white academic male" living in present day Toronto, is embedded in a socio-historical process that results in deeply different positions of privilege and power, but which process does not render him any more or less "authentic" in his sexual subjectivity than a person who defines her/himself interchangeably as a "queen" and "gay" in a working-class neighborhood of Afro-Caribbean people in the Caribbean.

My objectives in the remainder of this article are thus threefold: 1) to provide a brief (and of course only partial)<sup>5</sup> description of the complex socio-sexual terrain of Barbados, primarily from the perspective of Bajan “queens”; such documentation is necessary given the paucity of social science research that currently exists on diverse sexualities in the Caribbean (Kempadoo 2004:44, Reddock 2004) and indeed throughout the African-American diaspora (Ferguson 2007); 2) to analyze how and why a particular sexual subject position—the queen—appears to occupy a relatively accepted and visible position in Bajan public culture while gay-identified individuals are apparently invisible; 3) to analyze how and why Bajan sexual subjects like gays and queens do not mirror Euro-American sexual subjectivities and their relationships to hegemonic socio-sexual values. Particularly relevant in the Bajan sexscape are racialized intersections of gender and class structured through discourses of respect and reputation.

### **“Almost Every Neighborhood Had a Queen”**

This quote comes from Cherry, one of the members of the drag show troupe who performed in hotels and bars around the island. In my interviews with Cherry and other self identified queens, I would ask if they remembered seeing or hearing about individuals similar to themselves when growing up. Cherry, who is in her mid-30s, told me that she grew up in a number of “middle class” neighborhoods around Bridgetown with her mother who worked in the government and her father who was a school teacher, and that there was always a queen to be found wherever she lived: “When I was in private school, there was a queen who used to make all the kids’ clothes.” Divine, another member of the drag show troupe, didn’t remember seeing any queens in her self-described “upper middle class” neighborhood, but remembered hearing people talk about “men that dress up” whom they’d call “chi-chi or bullers,” and then seeing them every year during Cropover:

They had their own Tuk band, and I remember everyone in the crowd talking about “the buller band,” waiting for them to come down the street with their costumes, makeup and feathers...I was terrified of them but also fascinated by them. Drag queens were fierce then; you could not look at them too hard or they would stab you.

Darcy and Didi also remembered the queens in Cropover parades during their childhood, but Darcy, who is now in his 60s, remembered an even bigger event that attracted a great deal of attention, the “Queen of the Bees” pageant. This annual affair was held at different venues, ranging from the Globe Theater (a movie cinema located near the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Bridgetown) to its most memorable site, the National Stadium, where Darcy told me, “thousands of people, both gay and straight” attended. Other older queens (mostly in their 50s and older), as well as older heterosexual

---

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that although women were present in many of the venues I visited such as UGLAAB, Darcy’s bar, and of course in the neighborhood of Brockton, the majority of my interviewees were “male-bodied,” which means that this analysis of sexual diversity in Barbados reflects a gendered perspective, albeit one that is different from hegemonic heterosexual masculine narratives. Lesbian or female same sex desires and relationships were clearly evident and should be further investigated as their subjectivities, relationships, and organization would contribute to more fully representing the complexity of Bajan sexscapes.

Barbadians, ranging from university professors to residents of Brockton, also remembered hearing or reading about the pageant, and many noted that it was the type of event that members from all levels of society attended. As Darcy put it, this was “an event to be seen at,” and everyone attending, from the queens to the straight people, dressed up in their best clothes for an evening of entertainment and socializing.<sup>6</sup> Darcy said the pageant reached its peak in the 1970s but went into decline once the AIDS epidemic hit the island in the mid-1980s along with the rise in popularity of fundamentalist Christian churches.

Mr. Lovelace, an older self-identified gay man in his 70s, also remembered the pageants, but in his neighborhood, near Eagle Hall, he preferred to attend regular semi-private parties for men which were held in a rented room in a private building or in the yard behind someone’s house. These parties were attended by mostly married men “who had a grand time with each other,” according to Mr. Lovelace, indicating that there was a separate spectrum of less public social events for more gender normative men who desired men. “Everybody (in the neighborhood) knew what was happening at those parties”, he added, “but no one fussed.”

Most of the queens spoke of a mother or grandmother who “knew and understood” who and what they were when they were growing up: Divine said that her mother and aunt would “kill for me” if anyone threatened or harassed her, and some queens noted that their fathers, stepfathers or male relatives were also supportive, but also cautioned them “to be careful out there” (Gigi). However, Darcy told me that over the years she had sheltered young queens who had been thrown out of their homes by their families, once again indicating that there was uneven acceptance of non-normatively gendered individuals in communities around Barbados. Darcy said the older queens would look out for and protect the younger ones “coming up,” and would give them advice and provide them with a roof over their heads as well as other forms of material and economic support if necessary.

In Brockton, the working-class neighborhood where Darcy’s bar had been in operation for at least 20 years, I was informed that most people (male and female) had their best clothes made by queens, and that some queens ran rumshops, which were frequented mostly by heterosexual men, while others operated small convenience stores out of a room at the front of their home. Joyce, who grew up in Brockton, said that everyone knew the queens, and that while the children would often make jokes about them to each other they would never dare directly taunt a queen: “They were fierce and got respect.” Many of the queens’ tales of yesteryear also included memories of being verbally harassed as youngsters: name-calling, such as buller, chi-chi, girlie, in school yards and on the street, was a common occurrence, but most added that this was not accompanied by the threat of physical violence. Gigi, a younger queen in his 20s, said he was never “bashed” growing up, although he would “talk back hard” and confront his harassers. Fierceness through “talking hard” or fighting back and “getting respect” were qualities of the queens repeated by other interviewees which I eventually understood to be indicative of a particular calculus through which gendered and sexual diversity was organized and evaluated in these working-class communities. Cherry summarized it most succinctly:

---

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, one informant told me that the pageant was organized by a heterosexual married woman.

There were a lot of people who were very, very tolerant, but, once again, what they were looking for is how you carry yourself; if you are common...you will be treated that way. If you carry yourself in a certain way, the respect you will be carrying; you would get the respect of your peers, so it's a trade off.

What emerges from Cherry's comments are "classic" Caribbean social referents of respectability and reputation negotiated in and through local public and semi-private domains such as the street, yard, shop, and holiday celebrations. Cherry notes how a queen would earn respect from her peers through the way she "carried" herself, which encompasses not just bodily comportment but also behavior toward and treatment of fellow community members. Yet equally important was the queens' reputation for being fierce and standing up to anyone who confronted her, so that respect was also derived from having a fierce reputation.

As noted in the numerous debates over the organization, arrangement, and salience of respect and reputation as a primary organizational structure of Caribbean socio-cultural life, it is deeply problematic to assume that either one can be achieved by or applied to only one class, race, age group or gender (Freeman 2007, 5–6; Slocum and Thomas 2003, 556; Thomas 2004, 5–6 Whitehead 1997, 422–423)<sup>7</sup>. Chevannes' research on the role of the street in the socialization of poor, urban Jamaican males emphasizes how the street is interpreted to be the primary site where reputation is learned; it is a male space where "toughness" is learned and it is the site of (hetero) sexual initiation (2003). Stories of growing up in Brockton conveyed similar elements of toughness on the street, where boys who didn't act in an appropriately masculine way were insulted and harassed; but I think it is notable that these stories also included memories of queens walking the streets, running shops, and participating in public celebrations in which they interacted, confronted, worked, and partied with fellow community members. Through a combination of "respectable" behaviors (running a business, looking after family members, treating neighbors courteously, not flaunting their private relationships in public, not being a gossip) and having a reputation for talking "hard" (see Abrahams 1983) or fighting back if they were challenged or insulted, these queens were engaged in and practiced a set of values, an ethos or calculus of worth that other members of these working-class communities shared, which transcended or at the very least repositioned gendered and sexual desires so that they were not the only or primary features through which an individual was identified and evaluated. I will return to this point below, but suffice to say at this point that from the queens' stories of life in Afro-Barbadian communities up to the mid-1980s, a picture emerges of gendered and sexual diversity that was visible and at the very least acknowledged, if not unequivocally accepted in everyday life.

### **Queens and/are Gays**

As noted above, most queens felt that they were more accepted "back then." This opinion emerged through the memories of queens in their 50s or older, such as Darcy and

---

<sup>7 7</sup> See Wilson 1973 for one of the first descriptions of this dynamic in the Caribbean.

Cynthia, and in younger queens like Divine, Didi, Cherry (all in their 30s) and Gigi (26) who would remember stories and experiences of older queens from their childhoods and compare them with their lives today. Explanations abounded as to why attitudes had changed, but the most common factors noted were the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic throughout the 1980s, the increased popularity of fundamentalist churches (Pentecostal, Wesleyan, Evangelical, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist), and the increasing popularity of Jamaican music, specifically dance hall in the 1990s, with its aggressively hetero-masculine, misogynist, and homophobic lyrics. Darcy had to close her shop in the late 1980s and leave the island for a few years as her friends started to “drop off” from AIDS and rumors spread that AIDS could be caught from that shop. When she returned in 1999 she took over the bar which had been run for many years by a gay couple who had both died from AIDS. Darcy said the bar became a refuge for queens, gays, and lesbians who were now forced into hiding because of people’s fear and ignorance of the virus. This discrimination against and suffering of her friends and patrons motivated him to organize UGLAAB and hold an official public launch in National Heroes Square (located in downtown Bridgetown) on World Aids Day in 2001. Although there was some controversy around the launch, Darcy maintained that the group was welcomed by the Minister of Health and the Director of the newly formed National HIV/AIDS Commission.

Many of the queens felt that an additional problem today was lack of support and mutual respect between gays and queens, but there were diverse explanations as to what the divisions were based on and why this was so: Some, like Gigi, identified malicious gossip as a reason why he couldn’t trust his fellow gays: “when you see it comes to that mouth, and that red carpet unrolls and they speak with that big trumpet of a mouth, they can destroy you, you know?” He felt that other gays were jealous of him because of his success in the fashion design business at a young age. Gigi also felt that a lot of men who were bisexual or “on the down-low”, (keeping their desire for and sexual relationships with other men a secret from family and workmates) “don’t want any gays around them because we are openly gay people who feel comfortable with our sexuality.” Gigi’s comment introduced a distinction between being openly gay and other categories of bisexual or down-low men, which I did not hear mentioned in the stories of yesteryear, although there was often mention of the need to be discreet. Other queens such as Didi and Cherry emphasized the lack of mutual support between themselves and gays, and felt that they were the ones doing most of the work supporting and defending the community against hostile public opinion.

What I found interesting and confusing in these discussions were the various ways in which individuals would employ various combinations of gendered and sexual identity terminologies to describe themselves and the sexscape of contemporary Barbados. As noted above, the range of terminologies and divisions through which gendered and sexual desires were identified, organized, and compared seems to have proliferated in the talk about contemporary Bajan socio-sexual life in the Barbados of yesteryear. One of my first interviews was with Cherry, whose descriptions of problems faced by gendered and sexual minorities in contemporary Barbados were, to me at that time, articulate and easy to comprehend:

Cherry: A lot of the gay people have lost respect in themselves...because of the way they carry themselves.

D: Are they rude to you?

C: Ya, ya, ya. Some of them are rude, bombastic, uneducated; there is a whole list of negativities that some of them carry and they carry them with glee.

D: So, like, why have gay guys become more disrespectful to themselves and to others?

C: I think lots of gay men have seen that queens have actually been more accepted than gay men...I think that lots of queens here can do things and go places and get away with stuff that a gay man would get a bit of a tongue-lashing for.

D: If people found out he was gay?

C: Ya. (We) are totally out there, we have nothing to hide, our life is an open book. But you've got somebody now who is in the closet, got the family, the kids and all that stuff and they've got a lot to lose...so they avoid many things, and you find they actually avoid queens.

D: That's kind of sad.

C: Yes, that is sad, because wherever we go we don't just push queens, we push gay people first, and we take it to a deeper level.

Throughout most of our interviews Cherry maintained a relatively clear distinction between queens and gays, and I found her descriptions of the two groups relatively easy to comprehend as they reflected my understandings of the transgendered/gay divide in North American mainstream queer culture. Cherry described herself as transgendered and in the process of transitioning from male to female, so that her body was "coming into balance" with her mind in which she'd always known she was a girl. Growing up she said she never thought of herself as being gay, although some people considered her to be that.

On the other hand, Divine never referred to herself as transgendered, using the term "queen" instead, but like Cherry, said she had grown up feeling that she was a girl trapped in a boy's body, and had always dreamed of being "a living black Barbie." Yet a few minutes after telling me this standard (according to my perception) transgendered line, Divine described how, when she was 17, the pastor at her Pentecostal church had tried to cure her of her sickness by telling her that God would punish her by giving her AIDS, which she found strange as "I never told him I was gay." She went on to discuss how, "as a gay person you face so many obstacles...so it is important to find a path to

spiritual enlightenment.” Divine’s array of sexual identity terms in our conversations confused me, as I assumed that a transgender person would not describe herself as gay since the latter term, according to my Euro-American definition, refers to mutually desiring normatively gendered males which Divine didn’t by virtue of her gender transformative appearance and self-description. Later, I asked if she preferred men or women sexually, thinking that if she desired women then the gay self-appellation could make sense (i.e. if she thought of herself as a woman who desired other women, then her sexuality would be gay). Divine laughed when she heard this question, and responded, “honey, I’m just like you. It’s all about men.” When I asked if this meant I was a queen, she replied, “Yes, you’re a queen, I’m a drag queen, aren’t we all the same? ... You’re just wearing men’s clothes.” Other queens also alternated between describing themselves as a queen or gay, often introducing various sub-categories, ranging from “butch” queens (males who wear men’s clothing styles and often acted masculine in public) to “posh” queens (males who have well-paying jobs and/or had money and dressed in expensive, trendy men’s fashions, who may or may not be effeminate in their mannerisms) to “thugs” (males whose dress-styles and mannerisms emulate popular rap and dance hall singers) who were described by Gigi as just another type of “C class” queen, meaning that while they were rude, aggressive, and common in their behavior, they were still, in the end, queens.

This “code-switching” of terms in some Bajan queens’ conversations does not necessarily indicate a scenario in which new, “foreign” terminologies like gay and transgender have entered local lexicons and are rubbing up against and possibly replacing local distinctive terms like queen (see Altman 2001). While I am quite sure that sexual identity terms like gay were not created in Brockton, many have been in circulation there and throughout Barbados since at least the early to mid-1980s.<sup>8</sup> It is problematic to be still considering such terms foreign when they have been part of the local lexicon for over 20 years and possibly longer. However, instead of framing the argument in terms of local vs. foreign sexual terminologies (which carries more than a whiff of the problematic rubric of “authentic vs. corrupted” culture debates), I think it is more productive to foreground the ways in which these socio-sexual and gendered identifications overlap and abut, but never fully collapse into each other, and thus convey, as David Valentine has suggested, alternative ways of thinking through and organizing bodies and their desires (2007). Valentine’s ethnographic work amongst individuals in New York City who are labeled transgender by LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) and queer activists and community support groups revealed that many (but not all) individuals who are working-class, Latino and/or African American often make claims similar to those of the Bajan queens i.e. “I’ve been gay all my life, been a woman all my life.” (2007:3). Valentine draws attention to transgender as a term “with a history and a politics,” and charts its rise in popularity in the USA, focusing on how it reflects a particular separation and configuration of gender and sexuality developed primarily by and for white, middle-class

---

<sup>8</sup> This statement is based on my archival research of *The Nation*, one of Barbados’ two daily newspapers. I conducted a content analysis of the *Nation* since its inception in 1973 for references to homosexuality. I read every issue of the *Nation* published from September 1 to December 31 in the years 1974, 1984, 1994 and 2004. While a couple of 1974 issues referred to “homosexuals,” the term “gay” first appeared in 1984 in reference to a gay man named as a judge in a New York.

homosexual men, which works to exclude others who don't conform to this division. Valentine argues that these exclusions often operate in terms of race and class where overt (read: performatively effeminate) homosexuality is not compatible with white middle-class status and employment (2007, 43). Therefore, since the 1970s, homosexuality has been defined primarily upon the premise that gender and sexuality exist as two distinct, experiential categories. Male homosexuality has been defined primarily in terms of sexual orientation; in terms of gender, male homosexuals are normative masculine male-bodied individuals who are no different from their heterosexual counterparts except for what they do in the bedroom (2007, 61–63). “Gay” has thus come to represent a gender normative sexual orientation; if an anatomically male individual desires another male but thinks of himself or acts like a woman, then he is no longer gay but transgender; in essence, his gendered desires trump his sexual ones in terms of placement in this (arbitrary) dual structure of gender and sexuality.

In his work with African American and Latina sex workers, Valentine describes the complex terminological terrain they employ to describe themselves and others which, at times, resonates strongly with the queens' descriptions of themselves and the Bajan scene. Perhaps most important in relation to the Bajan queens' conversations, Valentine asks us to think about what it would mean “to talk about butch queens, butches, fem queens, women, transsexual women and butch queens up in drags as all, simply, ‘gay’”? (2007:84). In other words, when a male-bodied individual discusses how living and/or performing as a woman does *not* preclude her from being gay (where gay indexes erotic desire by and for someone who is male bodied) we should be attempting to make sense of their subjectivity from a position that does not assume that bodies, desires, and identifications can only be understood through conceptually distinct categories of gender and sexuality (see also Kempadoo 2004:27–28). At the same time, we cannot dismiss completely the Euro-American gender-sexuality framework and its attendant terminologies which are utilized in some of the narratives such as Cherry's.

When queens like Darcy, Divine, and Didi appear to be comfortable using “gay” and “queen” interchangeably for any male-bodied individual who desires another male-bodied individual, they are organizing bodies and their desires in ways that, at the very least, trouble Western mainstream LGBT categories that are presupposed upon a particular arrangement of distinctions between gender and sexuality: If male-bodied individuals who desire other male bodied individual—running the gamut from those who dress and act like women to those who dress and act like heteronormative men—are all labeled gay, then it would seem that sexual object desire operates as the categorical imperative. However, if this same range of individuals also labels themselves as queens, a term that implies effeminate or feminine behavioral and sartorial characteristics, then it would seem that what we (using a Euro-American framework) call gender is operating as the categorical imperative. There is simply no way that gender and sexuality can be completely and separately distinguished in these formulations; yet I am not convinced we can fully abandon them as analytical frameworks as they do help us to understand how desire, bodies, and behaviors are not reducible to simple dualities constructed through biological determinism (cf. Butler, 1990, 1993). At the very least, many of the Bajan

queens acknowledge the sexual and gendered heterogeneity of their own and other's desires and identities.<sup>9</sup>

This deep entanglement of gender and sexuality in some of the queens' descriptions of themselves and the people they know may also help to explain the absence of gay-identified individuals in more public contexts like the media, community and activist leadership roles. As noted at the beginning of this article, Bajan queens are socially visible not only through the obvious fact that by virtue of their dress and comportment they stand out in everyday contexts such as the street, bar or workplace, but also through the fact that some, such as Didi and Darcy, have been identified as spokespersons for the gay community through their leadership in UGLAAB (United *Gays and Lesbians* Against Aids in Barbados [my emphasis]), or in media articles where they are asked about gay life in Barbados and/or identified as a gay person. For example, in a two-page interview with Didi in the daily newspaper *The Nation*, the headline reads "Didi the Daring Diva"; to the right of it, in bold text, is a caption reading, "Didi never had any doubt about his sexual orientation: 'I knew I was gay from the time I was born,'" which accompanies a couple of photographs of Didi in her Kadooment band costume and wearing well-tailored pants and a shiny shirt with a colorful scarf wrapped around the collar (Henry and Hall 2004). Another article titled "The Kings of Queens" reviewed Didi and her fellow drag queens' performance at a bar in Holetown where the author writes that she "indulged in artistic depravity once again with the three queens of drama" (Lovely 2005:18). Thus, in public discourses such as the media's, queens are the only visible representatives of any gay community or identity, leaving other, more gender-normative homosexual identities unmarked, or in some cases, marked as underground, down-low, and/or dangerous in terms of their potential threat as carriers of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases into the heterosexual population. In other words, the public circulation of gay is synonymous with queen, so that the latter category operates as the default public representation of homosexuality. While this may not be a problem for queens like Divine and Darcy, gender-normative male individuals who identify as gay (and do not necessarily identify as a queen) may seek to avoid any public disclosure of their identity because of the fear of being assumed to be effeminate like the queens, and/or fear of being harassed by those who have come to associate gay with disease and duplicity<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Roderick Ferguson's description of "black rural sissies" in rural Georgia in the 1970s (2007) for a similar description of gendered heterogeneity.

<sup>10</sup> The perceptions, experiences and opinions of gender-normative gay-identified Bajan males require further analysis that is beyond the scope of this article but it should be noted here that most of the gay-identified men I knew did not explicitly state that they feared being identified as a queen. However, I discovered that certain characteristics of the (effeminate) queen represent taboo behaviors which these men try to distance themselves from as much as possible: Dwight, a self-identified gay man who was "undercover" (his term for signaling that he was not out about his sexuality at work or to his family), would often comment on my inappropriate clothing choices, saying that he was embarrassed to be seen with me wearing such tight shirts and short shorts. This would always surprise me, as in my opinion, I was wearing conservative clothing according to my gay white middle-class cultural norms (i.e. a loose-fitting cotton T-shirt and baggy shorts that ended just above my knees). Robert, who also identified as gay, told me to "stop breaking" my wrists one day when we were having lunch at Chefette, a local fast food chain. He felt that I was flopping my hands around too much as I talked which was drawing suspicious looks from people at surrounding tables. Thus for these self-identified gay males, the management of gendered performativity,

### **Bread and Two Faggots**

While the queens' terminologies and descriptions of the sexscape in Barbados were varied and complex, one theme found in most discussions of self and society was that of respectable vs. common or "bombastic" behavior. As discussed earlier, when the queens and Brockton residents talked about the past, they would emphasize how the queens of yesteryear were fierce and earned respect from everyone in their neighborhood through a combination of reputational and respectable practices. The importance of being respected and acting in a way that is not perceived to be common or rude continued to occupy a central theme in the queens' narratives of their lives in the present day, but it also operated as another means to divide homosexuals (and sometimes the entire population of Barbados) into different categories. Gigi was particularly articulate on this issue: As I noted earlier, it was Gigi who divided gay people into three categories, A, B, and C class:

Gigi: You call the A class person [someone] who already have it made, have a good income, nice job, they've got a house, and are mostly older. And persons in the B class are persons who are on that path, who want to make themselves someone, who are working very hard, working their ass off. They are trying to succeed in life and they don't depend on no one or any person. But C class now is the ones who are just, like, want to drag you down, pull you down. They are commoners. We call them bread and two faggots.

D: What does that mean, bread and two faggots?

Gigi: Fishcakes, you know we call fishcakes bread and two. There is two fishcakes in a salt-bread, yes? So they call them bread and two, that is what they're worth.

D: So bread and two faggots is, like, the lowest low?

Gigi: Ya, the lowest low, a dollar-fifty.

D: Wow, that's cheap!

Gigi: Yes, very cheap (laughter).

Not surprisingly, Gigi described himself as a B class on the way to A class individual. Gigi worked in an international credit card call centre in Bridgetown, and thus had a regular income. He also taught fashion modeling classes, and was paid to organize the occasional fashion show for his designer friends. While acknowledging he was not a

---

particularly in relation to clothing styles and physical movements that might be interpreted to be effeminate, occupied a central role in the construction of a socio-sexual identity, and while not stated explicitly, the (effeminate) queens such as Didi and Darcy likely operated as a sort of foil against which both gender normative masculinity and homosexuality were evaluated.

posh queen (another term for the “A” class), he clearly admired and aspired to be like this group.

While other queens were not quite as fine-grained in their analysis of queer classes, there would be consistent references to other queens or gays whose behavior was inappropriate and reflected poorly on the community as a whole. Darcy spoke about how she wanted to make her bar look nice so that it would be known as a “respectable place” where gays and lesbians could enjoy themselves and other people would see that they were not “low-life”. He also noted that the bar attracted men from “all different levels of society,” from Brockton to the wealthier suburbs in the hills around Bridgetown. When I asked her to elaborate on these different kinds of men, he responded, “There are different circles of gays here, different levels, but society is a state of mind: You can have a bigger house, car, job but in the end you come here (the bar) to meet boys.” I interpreted this comment to convey a slightly different position from Gigi on stratification amongst gays and queens in Barbados: Whereas Gigi’s divisions created the impression of separate and distinct classes that did not interact with each other (especially the “A” class), Darcy’s description acknowledged class distinctions but simultaneously emphasized their (temporary) transcendence through similar desires which placed them outside any heteronormative classed structure.

Two points emerge from these descriptions of gay/queen “classes”: First, that status, often described in terms of socio-economic difference, but also in terms of comportment and interpersonal social skills, is an important structuring principle of difference within queer networks in Barbados, which is not particularly surprising, as there is much discussion in research on Barbadian society of the important ways in which class structures and separates i.e. in terms of a small elite white landowner and business class, a now growing Afro-Caribbean middle class of educators, civil servants and entrepreneurs, and a still significant Afro-Caribbean working class who continue to struggle to make ends meet, (Beckles 1990, Barrow and Greene 1979, Freeman 2007). The second point is to reiterate the importance of respectability as a dynamic social ethos which simultaneously creates, reinscribes, and transcends gendered, classed, and sexual divisions in Barbados (Freeman 2007, 5). In the queens’ statements we witness tension between an idealized vision of an egalitarian unified community (whether that is amongst queens, gays, heterosexuals and/or all Bajans) premised upon mutual respect of and for all fellow citizens, and their perceived reality of a community riven with stress, envy, and resentment due to gendered, sexual and socio-economic differences, which therefore requires each individual to be prepared to be fierce and to “look out for herself” or to at least distance himself from others who insult, attack, and deride.

### **Conclusion**

I began this article by asking: what if Bajan sexual diversity or the Bajan “sexscape” is organized in ways that partially overlap or are co-constitutive with hegemonic queer Euro-American discourses of identity, community, and activism, but whose sexual practices and identities are refracted through other discursive socio-cultural, political and economic influences generated locally and transnationally? Based on the analysis of life narratives of individuals who identify themselves as gay, queen, transgender or some

combination of these terms, I have argued that while sexual diversity in Barbados is immersed in and partially produced through contemporary Euro-American gendered and sexual politics and identities, it is simultaneously produced in and through a relationship to local gendered and sexual identity politics, which requires us to acknowledge the ongoing influence of a colonized past, and its attendant classed, raced and cultural dynamics that produce unstable, unpredictable, multiple possibilities of sexual subjectivities. This sexscape is neither an illustration of a “creolized,” “hybrid” culture, nor is it a “pluralistic” compendium of multiple, discrete cultures. The queens’ understandings of themselves, their controversial visibility, and the relative invisibility of gays and lesbians reflect subjectivities and positionalities that simultaneously challenge and reveal their embeddedness in any singular Western or African, gendered or classed framework. Their narratives illustrate the ongoing tension between differentially located and produced subjectivities and values, which are pieced together in myriad, contextually shifting ways by individuals who are marginalized by virtue of their non-heteronormative desires and identifications. The result is contextually produced subject positions that may appear to be blended, multiple or fractured from a Euro-American socio-sexual perspective, but these verbs reflect more the social and analytical frameworks of the researcher than they do the viewpoint of the Bajan queens. Indeed, the queens’ self-understanding is produced through a local ethos influenced by multiple external factors, in which we can also identify locally generated values where individual identity is constructed through a complex, fluid calculus of classed, raced, sexed and gendered roles. These roles, in turn, are constrained by principles of respectability and reputation.

In their stories of the past and present, the queens stressed the importance of a combination of respectable behaviors and having a reputation for talking “hard” or fighting back if they were challenged or insulted. Related to respectability was status, often described in terms of socio-economic difference, but also in terms of comportment and interpersonal social skills, thus operating as a structuring principle of difference within the queer community (and reflecting its importance throughout Barbadian society). For the queens, respectability is a dynamic social ethos which simultaneously creates, reinscribes, and transcends gendered, classed, racialized and sexual divisions in Barbados.

Worth repeating is the cautionary proviso that this article represents only a very partial glimpse into the complex and rich terrain of sexual diversity in Barbados: gay-identified males, bisexuals, and lesbians were mentioned in my interviews and circulated through media discourse and thus merit further investigation for their views on everyday Bajan social life. Further research is also needed into interrogating the means through which status or class divisions may (or may not) segregate queer people in Barbados, and produce differing value systems and subjectivities. Also, the ways in which local sexual subjectivities are produced in relation to regional connections with other Caribbean islands and beyond (i.e. African-American socio-cultural influences) merits further investigation.

Finally, we cannot forget the obvious, but important fact that the presence of sexual diversity in this society does not equal the celebration of it. It is doubtful that queens ever had it easy in Barbados—terms like buller and chi-chi man have been around for a long

time and have always been used as insults in public contexts, and the queens face daily battles of harassment as they try to go about their business. Yet it is equally problematic if we lapse into making over-generalizing statements such as “Barbados is a homophobic society,” because they silence and flatten out the complex ways in which bodies and their desires are organized and evaluated in everyday life. As researchers and activists we must continue to focus on these rich narratives, interactions, and performances, or we run the risk of creating the very thing we are trying to challenge.

## REFERENCES

- Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah. 2006. The Strangest Freaks of Despotism: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives. *African American Review* 40(2): 223–237
- Abrahams, Roger. 1983. *The Man of Words in the West Indies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui. 1997. Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy. In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 63–100. New York: Routledge
- Altman, Dennis. 2001. *Global Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barrow, Christine, and J.E. Greene. 1979. *Small Business in Barbados: A Case of survival*. Cave Hill, Barbados: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of West Indies.
- Beckles, Hilary. 1990. *A History of Barbados: From Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boellstorff, Tom. 2003. Dubbing Culture: Indonesian gay and lesbi subjectivities and ethnography in an already globalized world. *American Ethnologist* 30(2):225–242.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- .1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Chevannes, Barry. 2001. *Learning to be a Man: Culture, Socialization and Gender Identity in Five Caribbean Communities*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press.
- .2003. The Role of the Street in the Socialization of Caribbean Males. In *Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, ed. Linden Lewis, 215–233. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

- Crichlow, Wesley. 2004. History, (Re)Memory, Testimony and Biomythography: Charting a Buller Man's Trinidadian Past. In *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses*, ed. Rhoda Reddock, 185–224. Kingston: University of West Indies Press.
- Dann, Graham. 1987. *The Barbadian Male: Sexual Attitudes and Practice*. London: Macmillan.
- Ferguson, Roderick. 2007. Sissies at the Picnic: The Subjugated Knowledges of a Black Rural Queer. In *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy*, ed. H.K Aikau, K.A. Erickson, and J. L. Pierce, 188–196. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Freeman, Carla. 2007. Neoliberalism and the Marriage of Reputation and Respectability: Entrepreneurship and the Barbadian Middle Class. In *Love and Globalization: Transformations of Intimacy in the Contemporary World*, ed. Mark Padilla, Jennifer Hirsch, Miguel Munoz-Laboy, Robert Sember and Richard G. Parker, 3–37. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Glave, Thomas, ed. 2008. *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gutzmore, Cecil. 2004. Casting the First Stone: Policy of Homo/Sexuality in Jamaican Popular Culture. *Interventions* 6(1):118–134.
- Henry, Anesta and Sabrina Hall. 2004. Didi the Daring Diva. *The Nation*, June 4, 18–19
- Kempadoo, Kamala. 2004. *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race and Sexual Labour*. New York: Routledge.
- Lewis, Linden. 2003. Caribbean Masculinity: Unpacking the Narrative. In *Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, ed. Linden Lewis, 94–128. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Lovely, Bad. 2005. The Kings of Queens. *The Nation*, February 4, 18.
- Mohammed, Patricia. 2003. A Blueprint for Gender in Creole Trinidad: Exploring Gender Mythology through Calypsos of the 1920s and 1930s. In *Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, ed. Linden Lewis, 129–168. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Murray, David A.B. 2002. *Opacity: Gender, Sexuality, Race and the 'Problem' of Identity in Martinique*. New York: Peter Lang Press.
- . 2006. Whose Right? Human Rights, Sexuality and Social Change in Barbados.

- Journal of Culture, Health and Sexuality*. 8(3):267–281
- Padilla, Mark. 2007. *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality and AIDS in the Dominican Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Palmie, Stephan. 2006. Creolization and its Discontents. *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* 35: 433–56.
- Reddock, Rhoda. 2004. Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: An Introduction. In *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses*, xiii–xxxiv. Kingston: University of West Indies Press.
- Slocum, Karla and Deborah A. Thomas. 2003. Rethinking Global and Area Studies: Insights from Caribbeanist Anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 104(3):553–565.
- Thomas, Deborah A. 2004. *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Valentine, David. 2007. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of A Category*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wekker, Gloria. 2006. *The politics of passion: Women's sexual culture in the Afro-Surinamese diaspora*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Whitehead, Tony. 1997. Urban Low-Income African American Men, HIV/AIDS and Gender Identity. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 11(4):411–447
- Wilson, Peter. 1973. *Crab Antics: The Social Anthropology of English-Speaking Negro Societies of the Caribbean*. New Haven: Yale University.