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# Embodied Theories: Local Knowledge(s), Community Organizing, and Feminist Methodologies in Caribbean Sexuality Studies

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## Abstract

This essay is a collaborative project that interrogates the role of the diasporic researcher and writer around issues of sexuality/sexualities in the Caribbean in a way that also describes methodologies useful to anyone working in this field. We outline and address the significance of feminist methodologies in Caribbean sexuality studies through embodied theories that encompass the importance of community organizing and attention to the local. We will identify various theories and languages that offer insights into the experiences and multiplicities of identity in terms of gender and sexuality and their intersections with race, class, and religion. This project troubles the divide between academia and community and demonstrates the myriad ways our theorizing must bridge this gap. We engage the work we both have done with the Caribbean International Resource Network in terms of marginalized populations, oral histories, building digital archives, and community organizing (local, regional, and diaspora). We address the following questions: how and where do we disseminate information about marginalized Caribbean sexual minority communities? Do this information, research, and data benefit these communities? How do gender and sexuality intersect with race, class, and religion for Caribbean sexual minorities? What have been some of the successes of community organizing in the region and what impact has this had, or not, on academic research and methodologies related to Caribbean sexuality studies? Overall, this project will assert the importance of feminist methodologies that are embodied theories and grounded in local knowledge and community building.

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## Introduction

This collaborative project outlines and addresses the significance of feminist methodologies in Caribbean sexuality studies through embodied theories that encompass the importance of community organizing and attention to the local. We will identify various theories and languages that offer insights into the experiences and multiplicities of identity in terms of gender and sexuality and their intersections with race, class, and religion. This project troubles the divide between academia and community and demonstrates the myriad ways our theorizing can bridge this gap. We consider feminist theories at the core of feminist methodologies; hence, we offer the concept of embodied theories as a feminist methodology that privileges the local, community organizing, and different forms of knowledge. As writers and scholars, we will engage the work we both have done with the Caribbean International Resource Network (Caribbean IRN) in terms of marginalized populations, oral histories, digital archives, and local, regional, and diaspora community organizing. We wonder, like our colleagues, “How can we deploy power creatively and consciously in the service of radical justice? And how effective are these strategies for bringing about individual and social change?” (Rodriguez 2003, 46) We assume all research activity—what we read, choose to study, and write about, and what and how we publish and teach—is political. We also assume that researchers strive to be not only ethical and responsible to their own ideas, but also to the people or material that is being studied. Therefore, we prioritize the local and community needs and different ways of knowing, particularly with regard to the study of Caribbean sexuality inside the region. This essay itself utilizes some of the same methods it proposes. One principal example of this is its collaborative nature: two humanities scholars present this essay, both of us committed to interdisciplinary research and active in creative, community, and analytical work beyond the academy, and both of us engaged as diasporic researchers and writers. While we do not wish to perpetuate “the mistaken notion that only one kind of justice work could lead to freedom,” we put forward the following ideas as one set of ways to approach Caribbean sexualities research, one possible way to freedom (Alexander 2005, 281).

## The role of the diasporic researcher

Places such as New York City, Montreal, and Miami are real and legitimate Caribbean sites because of population and cultural presence, as well as long histories of migration and transnational flows. Nevertheless, the role of the diasporic researcher is more fraught than many of us often admit.<sup>1</sup> We identify as Caribbean (with or without an additional, hyphenated marker), and yet we spend the majority of our time outside of the region. This physical distance does not always mean we know less about the region than those who live there, but it does mean that we know *differently*. Diasporic researchers should acknowledge those differences, which can lead to particular perspectives and insights. This type of acknowledgement can also spur the diasporic researcher to consult local archives and to collaborate with local scholars, community-based researchers, and other experts in meaningful ways. At the same time, location outside of the region means that we often have more access to resources. The greater access to resources means a greater responsibility to try to share resources and results within the region—an important part of the methodologies we propose in this essay. In other words, as Caribbean diasporic researchers and writers, we acknowledge our subject positions within our research and theories as fundamental to what we define as embodied theories that affirm the place of

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local knowledge(s) and community organizing. These concepts are evident in Caribbean feminist theorizing and practice—attention to the local and regional. But how do these feminist methodologies translate into Caribbean sexuality studies? What is the relationship between Caribbean feminism, feminist practice, and sexuality studies?

### **Significance of feminist methodologies in Caribbean sexuality studies**

Caribbean sexuality studies have in many ways emerged through the established field of Caribbean feminist theory. Feminist methodologies in Caribbean studies necessarily assert the importance of focusing on regional and local histories/herstories in practice and theory. As Patricia Mohammed asserts in her article “Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean,” “feminism as an expression of sexual equality must be itself historically located, despite the global discourse which feeds its growth” (Mohammed 1998, 7). Therefore, as we engage the significance of feminist methodologies in Caribbean sexuality studies, we must consider and define some of the practices of feminism in the Caribbean. The Caribbean feminist movement and women’s organizing for sexual equality can be seen in part through the publications by the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) at The University of the West Indies (in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados). Significant collections from these centers include *Gender in Caribbean Development* (1991), *Stories in Caribbean Feminism* (1998), *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought* (2002), *Gender in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Caribbean Perspectives, Visions and Possibilities* (2004), and more recently with the new journal *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*. Caribbean feminism and community organizing can also be seen more explicitly through organizations such as CAFRA (Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action) and CODE RED for Gender Justice.

CAFRA positions itself as an organization committed to fighting oppression: it “is a regional network of feminists, individual researchers, activists and women’s organisations that define feminist politics as a matter of both consciousness and action. We are committed to understanding the relationship between the oppression of women and other forms of oppression in the society, and we are working actively for change.”<sup>ii</sup> CAFRA frames feminism within the Caribbean context as being both consciousness and action, that is, engaged praxis—and feminist politics are grounded in the practical and intersectional analysis of oppression. However, in practice, sociopolitical issues in the Caribbean (as with much of the Global South) concerning women tend to be addressed through the topic of “gender and development” or through women’s organizations that may or may not support feminist consciousness. But CAFRA, along with other activist groups, is committed to feminist praxis *and* feminist thought within the region, building solidarity and connections that embrace different Caribbean women’s experiences. They fulfill their mission through various conferences, community workshops, publications, political actions, and community organizing, establishing cross-cultural and regional relationships. Further and more recently, the vibrant online and social media presence of the feminist activist collective CODE RED for Gender Justice has expanded the work of CAFRA through insightful and engaging conversations about gender and sexuality issues in the region.<sup>iii</sup> Graduate students at IGDS, at Cave Hill in Barbados, formed this collective, which has grown to include Caribbean feminists around the region and diaspora. They have engaged in a number of exciting activities and projects, including annual symposiums, workshops, and online campaigns; they also initiated the young

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feminist network called CatchAFyah. CODE RED uses a variety of approaches in its work that reflects the dynamic work of feminist activists, organizers, and scholars inside and outside the region. Hence, we can understand the work of Caribbean feminist academics and organizers with an intersectional multidisciplinary praxis whose methodologies are deeply invested in local actions and what we would argue are (local) embodied theories.

Caribbean feminist scholars also engage the practice of feminism grounded in the local even as they theorize about and debate definitions of Caribbean feminism and reveal its distance from Western notions of feminism. The special issue of *Feminist Review* in the summer of 1998 titled “Rethinking Caribbean Difference,” edited by Mohammed, represents an overview of activism and scholarship in Caribbean feminism. This issue includes articles by prominent Caribbean scholars who do work on gender, feminism, and women’s issues in the Caribbean, among them Rhoda Reddock, Hilary McD. Beckles, Bridget Brereton, Linden Lewis, and Eudine Barriteau; they cover the region while also discussing the specifics of Puerto Rico, the Netherlands Antilles, Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, and Cuba. Mohammed’s much cited “Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean” is a seminal essay that seeks to define feminism and feminist theory in the region through engagement with the politics of history and the complexity of Caribbean identity. She begins by explaining the region’s (and by extension the field of Caribbean studies’) necessary preoccupation with the past and ethnic identity as rooted in the sordid and brutal history of colonialism, which disrupted and eradicated much of the cultural memory of the indigenous Amerindian population and African peoples (Mohammed 1998, 7). In considering how ethnicity has political appeal that elides gender and sexual difference, Mohammed asserts the following:

Recognizing the different ways in which men and women within any cultural group experience enslavement, indentureship or migration is integral to understanding ethnic identity. The psychological scars of emasculation or defeminisation caused by such uprooting are not skin deep and have residual effects on gender relations and gender struggles within a society far beyond the periods of disruption (1998, 8).

In other words, she argues that the construction of masculinity and femininity during colonization continues to affect present relationships for all races and classes of people in the Caribbean. Thus, feminism in the Caribbean has been engaged with these constructions of “manhood” and “womanhood” while being affected by the struggle for gender equality in the larger global discourse. Mohammed’s project then seeks to theorize and interrogate gender identities inside the region, while deconstructing difference in an effort to support a feminist movement that is historically progressive and committed to changing consciousness, policies, and programs. Mohammed’s redefining of feminism is firmly grounded in Caribbean gendered experiences and histories while also reflecting a liberatory approach to the struggle of ending systems of oppression and domination.

An overview of feminist methodologies can provide us with a sense of how these resonate for the study of Caribbean sexualities. It is important to trace these relationships and investigations of gender, in part because they offer us a glimpse into both the silences and possibilities around the study of sexualities, same-sex desire, and sexual minorities in the region. The present collaborative project seeks to respond to the following question: how do feminist methodologies address issues of gender identity and sexuality, or do they? On the one hand, to be grounded in the local we must affirm the place of indigenous theorizing of feminist methods; on the other hand, if these grounded theories do not account for historically overlooked silences or possibilities, then we must borrow from other theoretical traditions or look more deeply at a range of Caribbean epistemologies. It is perhaps in this looking harder, or rather looking differently, that we will discover what we are calling “embodied theories” for the study of Caribbean sexualities. These theories can be grounded in feminist methodologies that utilize both social science and humanities approaches. Furthermore, they ought to engage the everyday experiences of sexual minorities, and offer tools and ways of examining sexualities (including same-sex desire) in the realm of culture and cultural production, where we may find multiple ways of knowing. In addition, feminist methodologies that are useful for Caribbean sexuality studies must incorporate not only specific local historical contexts, but also the intersections of race, class, and religion with gender and sexuality.

Women of color feminists have offered many theoretical and practical spaces for the understanding and analysis of these intersections, through the framework known as intersectionality. Chandra Mohanty asserts that there is a need for feminist analysis to recognize not only the importance of rewriting history, but also that such “practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity” (2003, 78). Similarly, in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde argues that members of marginalized groups must create new patterns of understanding difference in order to build coalitions and fight against racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and elitism (1984, 115). Lorde explains that we must be wary of ignoring and misnaming difference; thus, within the struggle for revolutionary change and liberation, we must define ourselves outside oppressive structures. For example, people who are marginalized must take charge of knowledge production—we must do the work of redefining ourselves, asserting subjectivity, and resisting dominant and oppressive structures. Lorde’s work exemplifies intersectionality and offers a pragmatic framework in which to organize around difference and against violence.

More specifically in her essay “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface,” Lorde discusses the multiple forms of violence that affect Black communities in the United States, specifically forms that emerge from sexism, racism, and homophobia. She argues that until we see those interconnections and build a consciousness and dialogue about them, “the continued blindness between us can only serve the oppressive system within which we live” (Lorde 1984, 64). While the context for the essay is the United States, her analysis is useful for other communities of color and postcolonial societies. In



particular, her words resonate as we think about the Caribbean context and the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The Caribbean still exhibits “the systematic devaluation” and economic, political, and social marginalization of Black women and other women of color. Lorde argues that we cannot accept some forms of violence and condemn others. In other words, we cannot fight against domestic violence and sexual abuse and do nothing about homophobia. Lorde’s work exemplifies the practical workings of feminist theories and methodologies that take into account the body and lived experiences.

### **Key aspects of embodied theories**

The acknowledgement of one’s own location is a fundamental aspect of embodied theories, an approach that is particularly relevant in sexuality studies, which are necessarily preoccupied with bodies. An embodied theory is a theory that does not ignore the reality of bodies—either of the people being studied or of those doing the analysis. We too often, for instance, talk about sex without any mention of pleasure, as is clear in the heavily used term “MSM (men who have sex with men),” which privileges global north epistemologies, HIV/AIDS work, and the international non-governmental funding complex over local language and ways of knowing. Embodied theories pay particular attention to the material reality of the body—how the body’s need for sustenance and safety can drive the decisions of everyone in every sector of a society. Most scholars are accustomed to discussing gender and sexuality together and in relationship to particular social groups, but not necessarily in conjunction with other factors. If we examine sexuality without attention to color, race, class, rural or urban location, and other aspects of identity, then we are quite literally not considering the *whole* person, and these omissions will diminish our research and its results.

This attention to the material body also needs to be applied in some degree to scholars ourselves. We should ask ourselves: What is the physical location of my body? How does the body I live in affect my perception of Caribbean sexualities? And for those who engage in field work, how do my apparent color, phenotype, and gender affect my interaction with subjects? The authors of this essay are often struck by how gleefully some white, North American scholars describe how they decided to study the Caribbean after a vacation, after experiencing carnival, or after sleeping with a Caribbean person. But these experiences are rarely included in their publications. Other scholars, though, do address this issue, some including autoethnography in their scholarship, as Carlos Decena and Gloria Wekker do. Wekker argues “if you are transparent about the ways in which you position yourself, including the sexual positions you occupy, then you produce better knowledge” (2009, 3). By proposing the importance of embodied theories, we encourage the production of knowledge that reveals and takes into account the material body. Yet such work should also account for the emotional body—that of ourselves as diasporic researchers and those of the people we are studying, writing about, and theorizing around. Embodied theories inherently suggest an embrace of the material *and* emotional body, and an acknowledgement of what that means for both the (diasporic) researcher and the subjects of study.

It would be naïve, however, not to point out that such disclosures can more negatively affect junior scholars and those who are women, and/or people of color, and/or not

heterosexual, and/or not located in the global north. But even if scholars choose not to disclose intimate knowledge of their bodies, we can still be aware of how that information affects our methods and analyses. And we must at least consider the ramifications of absencing the researcher's body from the written record when often our bodies are implicated during every stage of research (i.e., what we study, how we study, why we study, and how we write). We must also acknowledge that our research can have an impact not only on our own bodies, but also on the bodies of our subjects. In many ways, incorporating these considerations is a more honest approach to the work we do—avoiding the supposed but never achieved “objective” gaze that too often is or is assumed to be European, white, and male. This essay builds on the archive of feminist postcolonial theories and methodologies that have proposed and incorporated such practices.

Another aspect of embodied theories is taking different kinds of theories and discourses seriously. As Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley suggests, “while it is of paramount importance that we have theorists who engage with, deconstruct, and reconstruct now canonical cultural and gender theory, a real restructuring of postcolonial and sexuality studies will only take place when the academy *listens to other kinds of theorists*” (2010, 28). There is much work still to be done regarding how folk wisdom, subaltern cultures, and Caribbean traditions understand, describe, and theorize sexuality. Given that Caribbean cultures have survived slavery, indentureship, colonialism (in its original, as well as post and neo forms), globalization, and cultural imperialism, surely these “subordinated knowledges” are worth considering as legitimate epistemologies (Alexander 2005, 7). By treating methodologies as “conscious engagements with knowledge production,” we can expand the content of our knowledge while also making it more reflective of the Caribbean region (Rodriguez 2003, 161). In other words, we can understand this kind of knowledge production in conjunction with an awareness of the body and of local and regional contexts. As was mentioned briefly at the start of this essay, sexuality scholars (with the general exception of psychologists) are far more likely to describe and analyze what our bodies do rather than how we feel. Careful attention to feelings and the body can help researchers avoid one-dimensional portraits of Caribbean people and phenomena that often portray people as victims of circumstance who cannot feel pleasure, and/or as exotic others who are always ready or available for sex and pleasure.

Theorizing and accounting for the Caribbean sexual subject, including sexual minorities, must also factor in the ways in which colonialism, neocolonialism, globalization, tourism, and cultural appropriation affect conceptions and understandings of self and sexuality. Kamala Kempadoo argues in her book *Sexing the Caribbean* that we must begin to explore the complexity of Caribbean sexuality by coming to terms with its diversity: She proposes that “we need a different lens for thinking about Caribbean sexuality—that we cannot simply view it as a fabrication of the European mind and imagination, or dismiss it as colonial discourses or metaphors, but need also to view hypersexuality as a lived reality that pulses through the Caribbean body” (2004, 1). If we take seriously Kempadoo's argument here, then we must account for the body, for pleasure, for lived experience, for what is happening on the ground and in between/among actual people.

We must account for the daily and “embodied sexual practices, identities, knowledges, and strategies of resistance of the colonized and postcolonial subject without lapsing into notions of an essential native sexuality” (ibid., 2). Kempadoo proposes that “colonial and neocolonial ideas about the region have combined with West African, East Indian, Amerindian, and other non-Western traditions and legacies,” which have created a variety of sexual arrangements and practices that comprise Caribbean sexuality (ibid). These include multiple partnering, serial monogamy, informal polygamy, same-sex and bisexual relationships, and various types of transactional sexual relationships. The Caribbean sexual landscape consists of complicated and non-normative relationships and different sexual expressions that often contradict the national consciousness of much of the region, and the accompanying dominant (mostly) Christian conservative and pious conceptions of the region that are often posited as the Caribbean way. The region is (simply put) wrapped up in a politics of respectability, not only through dominant religions but also through the remnants of colonial structures of social and cultural norms.

Kempadoo acknowledges that dominant constructions of sexuality (of course) exist across the region, and she asserts hypersexuality and heteropatriarchy as two defining concepts of Caribbean-ness. Hypersexuality is a concept that explains the representation and framing of the region as overly sexual (i.e., paradise, exotic, primitive, other, etc.), and heteropatriarchy describes the privileging of male experiences within the dominant heterosexual structure, which delegitimizes women as well as non-normative sexualities and genders. “In this structure (heteropatriarchy), coupled with a discourse of hypersexuality, lesbians, gays, transgenders, prostitutes, and other ‘sexual deviants’ are cast not only as oversexed Caribbean subjects but as outlaws and noncitizens” (ibid). Nevertheless, Caribbean sexual minorities—sometimes named as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer, and other so-called sexual deviants—live and exist in the region. And if one pays particular attention to the community organizing within the region, we can begin to see the ways that people have challenged normative relationships, fought for change, and written their “outlaw selves” into citizenship.

### **The issue of language**

When the issue of language(s) is raised in Caribbean studies, the obvious concern is the monolingual nature of most of our work. This reality reflects the difficulty of attending to the many similarities and the many differences among territories speaking variants of Spanish, English, French, and the oft-forgotten Dutch. The thoughtful work of scholars such as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Kamala Kempadoo serve as models of multilingual research and analysis of Caribbean sexualities. In addition to this serious issue, there are other language concerns particular to Caribbean sexuality studies. Foremost among them is not to take seemingly benign terms—such as *woman*, *man*, and *prostitution*—for granted. Much work has been done, from Sojourner Truth to Toni Cade Bambara and Judith Butler, and specifically in Caribbean studies by Tinsley, to question the term “woman” and how it functions in relationship to people of different races, classes, and times.<sup>iv</sup> Reading and citing this body of work, and taking the questioning of “basic” and “obvious” terms seriously will enrich analysis. Similarly, we should avoid the use of “victim language,” language that makes people into objects rather than subjects. Examples of problematic language include “victims of AIDS,” and “victims of sexual abuse”; alternatives include “people with AIDS” and “survivors of

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sexual abuse.” This kind of attention to language is directly linked to our desire to affirm individual agency and acknowledge people’s humanity and feelings as complex beings. Furthermore, researchers must know the origins and context of terms. A clear example is the use of queer, LGBT, and MSM to refer to people who use very different terms to define themselves. At best, such labels are inaccurate; at worst, they enact an epistemic violence upon Caribbean subjects by denying their own agency to name and define (or not name *or* define) themselves and/or their behavior. While the use of terms such as *gay* and *prostitution* may seem to make sense, they actually invoke particular places, histories, and circumstances. It is important to consider how people name themselves and describe their own behavior, as well as expressions found in regionally specific language. If researchers insist on using terms such as *gay* and *prostitution* rather than less geopolitically based—and potentially more accurate—terms such as *sexual minority* and *sex work*, then we must acknowledge the histories of those terms and explain why they are appropriate. Similarly, when we use local Caribbean terms, we must do so accurately, consistently, and in appropriate contexts. Simple translations (e.g., masisi=faggot, friending=prostitution, pato=queer, mati=lesbian, or manroyal=dyke<sup>v</sup>) are far less useful than detailed explanations of how and when a particular term is used. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes’ use and transformation of the term *loca* is a good example of appropriate, creative, and analytical employment of a local term. *Loca* in Spanish literally means “mad woman” but in the Puerto Rican context *loca* “in its slang derivation, means queer, perhaps something akin to queen” that can have both derogatory and endearing connotations generally used to describe feminine men (La Fountain-Stokes, 2011).

Just as we advocate for the inclusion and analysis of different types of theories, we should also have a more expansive attitude toward language. For instance, use of language of and about the sacred is, in non-theological academia, in its nascent stage.<sup>vi</sup> Similarly, the “language” of cultural products such as music, carnival, sport, and child-rearing practices “provide important insights that may not be gleaned from statistical data,” which can be even more useful when such data are not available (La Fountain-Stokes 2009, xiii). Additionally, the collection and study of oral histories/herstories within Caribbean sexuality studies offers additional ways of knowing and understanding the landscape of sexuality in the region and its diaspora.

### **Disseminating research**

How and where we scholars disseminate our research has a direct effect on the field of Caribbean studies as a whole, which depends, as does any academic field, on researchers reading, responding to, and building on each other’s work. A variety of scholarly formats beyond the printed, peer-reviewed journal now exist, even though that format remains the standard for tenure decisions in North American colleges and universities. As two untenured faculty members, we are deeply empathetic to this situation (as we both work towards tenure). And yet we remain convinced that publishing beyond the traditional route is more a sense of responsibility than option, and can contribute to both community building and activism, while coexisting with various tenure requirements.

A number of Caribbean-oriented, peer-reviewed journals exist, including *Small Axe*, the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, the *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, and *Sargasso*.

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There are also several electronic, peer-reviewed journals, including, the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*. These are respected journals that publish cutting-edge work. Other publishing options include non-academic venues such as blogs, Caribbean newspapers, and online resources such as the Caribbean IRN's online collection. While some of these publications are less likely to be considered strong contributions to a tenure dossier, many have readerships that are broader than those of academic journals and reach a very different audience. Both the prestige-conscious and those who lack job security should consider publishing their work in a peer-reviewed print journal, and then publishing a shorter, or longer, or slightly differently focused essay in another venue. If interviews have been conducted as part of the research, these can be published separately. As scholars and creative writers, we have pursued all these avenues. We have also sent PDFs of published papers directly to Caribbean colleagues and community groups in an effort to make our research more accessible within the region.

We must begin broadening the academy's notion of "important" publications, and begin "valorizing diverse publications as valid sites for the dissemination of knowledge," even as we continue to publish beyond its boundaries (Parés et al. 2007). Asking libraries to subscribe to Caribbean-based journals (and to buy books from UWI Press, Ian Randle Publishers, and other Caribbean-based publishing houses), engaging colleagues about the quality of electronic journals, and extolling these publications when writing recommendations or tenure evaluations for junior colleagues are all ways that we can change the academy from within. In addition, we urge emerging scholars to consider non-print venues, such as radio interviews and talks to a variety of audiences, especially beyond the university. Further, we can ask conferences to webcast lectures and panels so that they are more accessible to people in the region. As Juana María Rodríguez reminds us, "Discursive spaces need not be institutional, however; the chatroom, the bar, the street corner, the computer screen also serve to define subjects and construct knowledge practices" (Rodríguez 2003, 6). The issue of dissemination is vital, because one way research can benefit Caribbean communities is by *reaching and engaging* those communities as equals; this is a key way to take seriously the lives and experiences we are writing about and studying. This issue is connected to how scholars interact with and how our work affects Caribbean communities.

Obviously, the question of whether information benefits Caribbean communities depends both on the research and the researcher. The clear solution is to ask people in the relevant communities. Though this may not be as easy as it sounds, it is not particularly difficult. Communication with non-academic stakeholders of our work (and academics in different regions) can take place at every stage of the research process, from conceptualization to analysis to publication. Such communication might consist of asking activists what research questions they would like answered or asking stakeholders to comment on publication drafts. "Benefit" also has a broad range of meanings. Benefit can be the legitimization of an identity, strategy, or organization. It can also mean physical materials, data, information technology, and/or labor provided to a community. Traditions of engaged scholarship provide a number of similar approaches to conducting research in a respectful, responsible, and responsive manner, rather than "hit and run" work that benefits the scholar's career but is not made available to any non-academic

community. In other words, research, data, oral histories/herstories, collected archives, and interviews ought to be readily accessible to the community they are about and from.

### **Local knowledges and community organizing**

We must turn to the realities of Caribbean sexual minority community organizing to investigate and interrogate the possibilities and successes of how diasporic researchers make “selves” and bodies legible, written, and known. A vital question, then, is how are these embodied theories that we have described above working in practice—and what are the related challenges, successes, and strategies? Furthermore, it is important to ask how the successes of Caribbean sexual minority organizing affect the academic research and methodologies of Caribbean sexuality studies. We argue in this project that like-minded researchers seek answers and tools for analysis, with specific attention to the work being done in the region. We also argue that it is through local scholarly and non-scholarly knowledges, community organizing, and embodied theories that we can transform the limited discourses around sex and sexuality for Caribbean people generally and sexual minorities particularly.

This attention to the local and to the realities of sexual minority organizing in the region has led to important interrogations of different kinds of homophobias and explanations of how homophobia works in different communities across the region. Such work was brought together through the first “Caribbean Sexualities Gathering” in Kingston, Jamaica, in June 2009, sponsored by the Caribbean International Resource Network (IRN), which connects academic and community-based researchers, artists, and activists around the Caribbean and in the diaspora in areas related to diverse sexualities and genders.<sup>vii</sup>

The Caribbean IRN brought together over 30 scholars, artists, writers, and activists from around the region, representing more than 10 Caribbean countries, as well as several of the local and regional Caribbean sexual minority advocacy organizations—including SASOD, CAISO, J-FLAG, FOKO Curacao, among others.<sup>viii</sup> The gathering consisted of a panel discussion at the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) conference, a five-hour workshop, and a closing reception; during these events, we communed, networked, and collaborated. Some of the highlights included intense dialogues about the many issues affecting sexual minorities in the region, and shared specifics in different countries. We also talked about sexual minority communities in the region and how to deal with homophobia and the struggle for sexual and gender equality. We discussed the need to theorize about different kinds of homophobia and the need to recognize and discuss how vibrant sexual minority communities can exist alongside intense homophobia. We talked about different ways of “being out,” concerns about safety, and the privilege of visibility. We discussed allies, the support of families, and creating new kinds of families. We brainstormed about how to create safe spaces for sexual minorities and gender non-conforming people. We formulated ideas about how to use academic and creative work as forms of activism. We discussed possible collaborations among researchers, community organizers, and creative producers—and how some of us blur the lines among these distinctions.<sup>ix</sup>

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Out of this network and regional building in 2009, and our work with the Caribbean IRN and other organizations, several projects have emerged that blur the lines between academia and community. These projects are grounded in the local and reflect embodied theories in their creation and production, including various oral history projects and the building of a digital archive housed through the open access Digital Library of the Caribbean at [www.dloc.com/icirn](http://www.dloc.com/icirn), comprising three collections so far—a general collection of materials from newspaper articles to academic papers, the Jamaica Gay Freedom Movement Archives, and the Rainbow Alliance of the Bahamas Archives. Furthermore, we published an online, open access collection in June 2012 called *Theorizing Homophobias in the Caribbean: Complexities of Place, Desire and Belonging*, at [caribbeanhomophobias.org](http://caribbeanhomophobias.org). This is a multi-media collection of activist reports, creative writing, critical essays, film, interviews, and performance and visual art that defines and reflects on the complexities of homophobias in the Caribbean, while also expanding awareness about Caribbean sexual minority lives, experiences, and activism in the region and its diaspora. This collection is unique in its creation and production because of its accessibility, multimedia format, and the collaborative work among activists, scholars, artists, writers, and community-based organizations and researchers inside and outside the region. The concept of embodied theories is at the center of this collection as it pays careful attention to and privileges local and regional knowledge production and community organizing. The Caribbean IRN has also initiated a collaborative intervention in the realm of academia through the annual Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) conference. At the last three CSA conferences, the focus and networking of people involved in the Caribbean IRN and regional sexual minority organizations have strengthened both academic and community knowledge production and building. At these conferences, we have seen the numbers of panels and discussions about sexuality grow, as well as the participation by openly sexual minority Caribbean people—scholars, graduate students, activists, and community workers. We challenged the heteronormative and heterosexist dynamics of the conference space. We opened spaces and forums to discuss strategies to confront homophobia, while building coalitions, and theorizing/researching Caribbean Sexuality Studies. We also started the dialogue and organizing within CSA to form the first Caribbean Sexualities Working Group, and many of us through local, regional, and diasporic networks are sustaining this work. Moreover, the Caribbean IRN collaborated with the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at UWI St. Augustine and CAISO to offer a unique short course on Critical Sexuality Studies in July 2013, which included a series of public events.<sup>x</sup> The authors have focused here on our own work with the Caribbean IRN because it spans both academic and non-academic realms, and because we are intimately familiar with it. Of course, many individuals and organizations, including CAFRA, SASOD, Pink House, Red Thread, CAISO, Sevovie, Caribbean HIV/AIDS Partnership, CODE RED for Gender Justice, CatchAFyah Network, and CariFLAGS, are doing important work around Caribbean sexualities.

Some of the challenges Caribbean communities continue to face include the politics of respectability, failures to openly discuss sex and sexuality, religious fundamentalism, cultural norms, legacies of colonialism, the ways in which homosexuality is framed as a white or Euro-American disease, and emergent forms of imperialism and neocolonialism. Moreover, the symptoms of homophobia sometimes emerge in violent ways through

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institutions and culture—for instance in music (particularly dancehall, which when labeled “murder music” becomes the scapegoat for all things homophobic, whereas other Caribbean music is rarely discussed), HIV/AIDS work, human rights discourse, foreign funding, silence and stigma of HIV/AIDS and sex work, and the push/pull of migration. However, the local and regional engagement with these serious issues must be highlighted, analyzed, and engaged to achieve a more complete understanding of Caribbean sexualities and lived experiences of sexual minorities. Therefore, anti-violence work and sexual minority community organizing must be connected to locally rooted conversations and frameworks about social change and social justice—and they must account for intersectionality and the relationships among various kinds of violence (e.g., patriarchal violence contributes to homophobic violence).

The successes of this kind of work are reflected in the work of campaigns in the region through Caribbean advocacy organizations such as SASOD (Guyana), CAISO (Trinidad and Tobago), J-FLAG (Jamaica), CariFLAGS (Regional), Sevovie (Haiti), and PinkHouse (Curaçao), among others. These organizations and networks have built and are building coalitions and reflecting the praxis we have outlined here through existing coalitions that expand political campaigns to include sexual minority concerns, the hosting of political education workshops, and community dialogues on gender, sexuality, homophobia, violence, community building, and Caribbean history, all the while providing and sustaining safe spaces for sexual minorities, sex workers, and others in the region. Caribbean sexuality studies must take praxis, itself an embodied theory, seriously in its scholarship. Meanwhile, those of us in academia outside the region (diasporic researchers) who are deeply engaged with and tied to this work must continue working to make the research, data, and scholarship more available and more easily accessible for activists, community workers, teachers, artists, writers, and institutions in the Caribbean. In this way, we can strive to truly connect with each other and create community among scholars, researchers, writers, activists, community workers, activists, and artists.

Conducting research that is respectful of and responsive to the communities we study, that acknowledges the spatial as well as intellectual location of the scholar, that acknowledges the materiality and affect of the body, may seem to be an onerous task, especially when one is also encouraged to take different languages and ways of knowing seriously, and to distribute one’s research broadly. In truth, though, many of us scholars want our work to be responsive and to be widely read and understood. Our work is typically not simple or easy, even without these considerations, and we know that the better our scholarship is, the more it can benefit our communities in and beyond the academy. We encourage our fellow scholars “not [to] be ashamed of finding pleasure in our work,” and to find that pleasure in an expansive worldview represented, in part, in the methodological approaches suggested here (Rodriguez 2003, 161).



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<sup>i</sup>. Carole Boyce Davies and Rinaldo Walcott are two notable exceptions.

<sup>ii</sup>. The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action, [www.cafra.org](http://www.cafra.org).

<sup>iii</sup> CODE RED for Gender Justice. <http://redforgender.wordpress.com/>

<sup>iv</sup>. For more info, see Sojourner Truth's "Aint I A Woman," Toni Cade Bambara's essay "On the Issue of Roles," and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, More work needs to be done to unpack the term "man" in relationship to the Caribbean, though the collections *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean* by Linden Lewis and *Learning to Be a Man: Culture, Socialization, and Gender Identity in Five Caribbean Communities* by Barry Chevannes are major interventions.

<sup>v</sup>. For descriptions of these terms, see Lescot and Magloire's film *Of Men and Gods*, Kamala Kempadoo's *Sun, Sex, and Gold*, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' article "Queer Ducks, Puerto Rican Patos and Jewish

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American Seygelekh: Birds and the Cultural Representation of Homosexuality,” Gloria Wekker’s *Politics of Passion*, and Makeda Silvera “Man Royals and Sodomites.”

<sup>vi</sup>. See Jacqui Alexander and Elizabeth Pravisini for explorations of the sacred.

<sup>vii</sup>. The IRN is housed at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York, funded through the Ford Foundation, and located on the Web at <http://www.irnweb.org>.

<sup>viii</sup>. The authors of this paper were co-organizers of this event. Organizations represented included Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation in Trinidad (CAISO), FOKO Curacao, Jamaican Forum for All Sexuals, Gays and Lesbians (J-FLAG), Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination in Guyana (SASOD).

<sup>ix</sup>. The full report is available online through the Digital Library of the Caribbean, Caribbean IRN Collection: <http://dloc.com/AA00000022/00001>.

<sup>x</sup> For more info about the Critical Sexuality Studies course, see the Caribbean IRN website: <http://www.irnweb.org/projects/advanced-sexuality-studies-course/>