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# Cathexis, Catharsis, and the Challenge to Contemporary Caribbean Feminist Theorizing

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For decades, Caribbean feminist and gender scholars have been dissatisfied with unequal North-South discursive exchanges, an osmotic process Eudine Barriteau defines as “imported theoretical constructs that did not stimulate critiques of epistemologies, methodologies and practices, and [sic] therefore reinforced and maintained exclusions and invisibility around key dimensions of women’s lives” (Barriteau 2003, 3). Conversely, Patricia Mohammed seeks to subvert “the artists and architects of colonisation [who] attempted to achieve opacity [of Caribbean self-imaging] by overlays of the same tone in order to obliterate cultures” (373).

Almost a decade after *Confronting Power*,<sup>1</sup> Barriteau opines that there is “no contemporary in feminist theory but a recurring, repeating, refracting past.”<sup>2</sup> In her review of Patricia Mohammed’s *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation*

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<sup>1</sup> Eudine Barriteau, ed., Introduction to *Confronting Power Theorizing Gender. Interdisciplinary Perspectives in the Caribbean* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Eudine Bariteau, “Protecting Feminist Futures in the Caribbean’s Contemporary” in *Contemporary Issues in Caribbean Research on Gender and Feminism*. IGDS Biennial Symposium. (Cavehill, Barbados. February 24- 25, 2011.)

(2011), Jane Bryce highlights Mohammed's challenge to extant and emerging scholarship to find "new categories of analysis...other than the *tired* old ones of class, race and gender" (Mohammed 2011, 16. My Italics.). This epistemological and affective shift from an enthusiasm with the "emergence of an embryonic Caribbean feminist epistemology" (Barriteau 2003, 3) to, arguably, a seeming fatigue with overdetermined discourses begs the questions, "Is there categorical cathexis within contemporary feminist and gender theorizing in Caribbean, and how can we translate cathexis to catharsis using the new geographies of knowledge emerging out of discursive and semiotic translations Barriteau and Mohammed are themselves crafting?"

This nexus in Caribbean gender discourse is reminiscent of a contentious theoretical moment in second-wave feminism when in response to the call by black, Chicana and Third World feminists to theorize *difference*, hegemonic feminism chose instead to engage in a post-identity rhetoric. But the proposed epistemological shift here in the Caribbean is more productive, choosing instead of a politics of erasure, a politics of spatial reclamation and renarrativizing, what Chela Sandoval, Shahnaz Khan, Obioma Nnaemeka, Frantz Fanon, Leila Ahmed, and Belinda Edmondson imagine discursively and semiotically as third or intermediary spaces and perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

This fifth issue of *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* is a valid site upon which to reopen and navigate these productive tensions among the possibilities of new theories, new categories, new methodologies, new ways of seeing and/or just new frames of reference in the Caribbean. How can we use this categorical imploding to make more salient meaning of the UN's declaration of 2011 as International Year for People of African Descent and the production of *CRGS's* next issue based on Indo-Caribbean Feminisms.

Like *Imaging the Caribbean*, this general issue is an eclectic mix of themes and subject matters, a variety of methods of analysis from the discursive to the visual to the tangible. The essays, book reviews and fictional pieces point to a determination of Caribbean

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<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg, 108-126 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990). Belinda Edmondson, "Race, Gender, and the Caribbean Narrative of Revolution" in *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film*, ed. Bishnupriya Ghosh and Brinda Bose, 63-78. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997). Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 2000.) Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (Penguin: London, 2000.) Shahnaz Khan, *Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2002.) Obioma Nnaemeka, "Mapping African Feminisms," adapted version of "Introduction: Reading the Rainbow" from *Sisterhood Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora in Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, 31-40. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2005.)

people to delve into, excavate, reconstruct and retell their collective and individual histories; express their unique and varied realities and subjectivities as seen from their own geographic, cultural, and gendered locations; and negotiate the politics and power of aesthetics, erotics, iconography, and agency.

Can a politics of the visual and tangible and its resultant affect serve as a new platform from which to theorize the Caribbean? Lawrence Waldron and Patricia Mohammed through analyses of iconography and aesthetics provoke the disruption of extant epistemological and ontological constructions of Caribbean peoples: their histories, their social organizations, their cultural practices, and their spiritualities.

Lawrence Waldron's "By Unseen Hands: Regarding the Gender of Saladoid Potters" takes us as far back as pre-Columbian times to the peoples of the Lesser Antilles, whose iconographic and symbolic pottery has led to speculation on not only the gender of these fine artisans but also the meaning of gender in their zoomorphic and anthropomorphic worldview. Representations of the turtle and the frog abound in the artifacts as well as the craftsmanship of the homes of these indigenous peoples and their descendants, the Tainos. That the animals from which human life sprang are amphibious speaks to the spatial movements of the people as they negotiated among spiritual, terrestrial and aquatic realms.

Patricia Mohammed's *Imaging the Caribbean* uses a different approach in dealing with the right of Caribbean people to portray ourselves in terms different from the Other, as Western scholars and artists have long positioned the region's inhabitants. In this book's review by Jane Bryce, we learn that Mohammed's research spans a period of 500 years. Bryce observes that the book "In taking the *visual* as the primary medium for reading Caribbean culture... contests not only the primacy of writing as a way of organising knowledge, but also the conventional wisdom that the primary mode of Caribbean expression is orality." She quotes Mohammed who states, "I privileged visual culture, because I believe that human sense perception has survived over long periods because of visual production".

Paula Morgan and Denise Bacchus validate fiction as a salient pedagogical tool as well as a canvas from which to draw alternative frames of reference. Paula Morgan's "Like Bush Fire in My Arms: Interrogating the World of Caribbean Romance" was first published as part of the Working Paper series produced by the Centre for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS), now the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS). The essay is reproduced here as part of the IGDS project to preserve the Working Paper series collection.

Morgan foregrounds her paper on the emerging genre of Caribbean romance fiction by discussing the history and social reception of the romance novel. She then goes on to discuss the genre, using examples from the seminal Caribbean Caresses Series, focusing mainly on this series' success or lack thereof in challenging stereotypes and establishing a truly distinctive Caribbean branch of this genre.

Commenting on one of the formulaic prescriptions for heroines of the romance genre, Morgan observes, “In the traditional romance peopled by Caucasians, the blush is particularly useful to betray the body’s involuntary response which invariably runs counter to verbal assertions. As if to compensate for having ‘mahogany-brown’ skin, [Deidre] D’Allan’s protagonist blushes with amazing regularity, at the slightest provocation... ‘Are you blushing, then?’ he said, laughing softly. ‘Or is it just the light from the fire that’s giving you that glow? And do you know that some people believe that dark-skinned people don’t blush’ (D’Allan 12).”

Morgan also expresses her concern regarding the context in which these novels portray sexual violence. Though sexual violence is common in Caribbean diasporic literature, the portrayal of this serious subject matter in a context that romanticizes it raises some concerns, bearing in mind that many of the Caribbean romantic novels’ readers are impressionable teenage girls.

A more activist approach to using fiction in fostering students’ critical literacy is actualized in one of Denise Bacchus’s Santa Barbara City College classrooms. Her essay “The Novel as a Bridge to Understanding Violence and Oppression” describes how Bacchus uses Danticat’s text *Breath, Eyes, Memory* along with Paolo’s Friere’s concept of critical pedagogy as well as the conditions within Haiti to engage twenty-five college students of varying ethnicities and nationalities—whose literacy levels were below the required standard—in a project that would serve to build their academic as well as social consciousness.

Bacchus’ methodology of multiple pedagogical tools—student surveys, journals, rewriting the novel’s end—stimulates students’ creativity and serves as testament to the interactive nature of student-centred learning. Bacchus’ goal is to get students to understand that borders are fluid and permeable and that students bear a social responsibility beyond their anatomical and collegial boundaries. Bacchus’ essay is also a timely reminder, given the dire state of affairs in the Caribbean with reference to high incidences of crime and violence, that a critical pedagogy is desperately needed to teach young people the individual, collective and liberatory power of education; so they themselves can become transformative social agents. Additionally, Haiti as both literal and symbolic representation of human suffering, human resilience, and human in/justice speaks to the concepts of, race, class and gender as still necessary analytics of power. Instead of precipitating a post-identity era then, should we seek instead to complicate the categories differently, ask different questions like feminist science did, rather than construct completely new categories and face the same nagging concerns?

Whereas the academic essays form the nucleus of each journal’s issue, the *CRGS* continues to present the works by Caribbean artists, poets and writers within it. Hence, in this issue, we have two poems by Dahlia James-Williams and a short story by Kavita Vidya Ganness that assert a [Caribbean] woman different from that of quiescent spouse and dutiful wife. In “Joe Grind”, James-Williams inverts the accepted Caribbean persona of the male adulterer and applies it to the unfaithful wife instead. In “A Gun at Mi Head”, James-Williams portrays a woman, one of thousands in the Caribbean, who routinely

experiences violent abuse by her mate. But in this case, the wife will not continue to accept such abuse and has made plans to put a stop once and for all to it.

Similarly framed within a poetics of eroticism, “Hooked...” is a provocative short story about a narrator mired in the nexus between fantasy and reality, love and obsession. By Kavita Vidya Ganness choosing not to reveal the narrator’s gender, she immediately calls heteronormativity and heterosexuality into question. The story’s line, “My live-in girlfriend, Tenisha, had returned to me a changed woman”, almost automatically compels the reader to gender the speaker as male, especially given the numerous sexual innuendos and overtures scaffolding the text. We are still unable to deal with genderless subjects; for interpersonal, sexual, and social relationships remain more legible and comprehensible when bodies are inscribed with gender and other analytics.

Although this particular narrative appears to be about Tenisha’s trip to Abu Dubai; her return with the narcotic Shisha and a Hookah, the pipe with which to smoke it; the sensuousness and vivid landscape of the East from which the narcotic derives; and ultimately the narrator’s addiction to this new drug and obsession with the Middle Eastern experience, it becomes increasingly clear “Hooked” is more about the narrator being *hooked* on Tenisha than on Shisha, and that Tenisha is the narcotic that keeps the narrator suspended and powerless between the fantasy of eroticism and the reality of loneliness and loss of identity. “Shisha, such a sweet word like the name Tenisha,” the narrator muses.

Tenisha, it seems, wields a power over the narrator of which even the narrator is unaware or to which the narrator has surrendered. Yet, one wonders if Tenisha’s travels are not moments of escape for her as well, and the drugs are the means through which she can manage her lover’s suffocating obsession as well as her own dependencies. The narrator is hooked; but Tenisha, too, may also be trapped. Why does she return? So “Hooked” begs interrogation of an erotics of power and the multiple dimensions of social engagements as the hooked, the hooker, and the Hookah become irreducibly entangled. The same questions apply to Joe Grind’s lover as we wonder if the subject-object dialectic is really inverted or reestablished. Is agency possible only through another [hetero]sexual relationship? What is agency then, and are our existing frames of reference adequate tools of analysis, or are we mired in a “tired” binary of self/other, agentic/complicit?

Ganness seems to rescue us from this Cartesian dichotomy though by provoking the reader even further to complicate constructions of masculinity and femininity and tensions within sexuality. Her narrative opens “My mouth closed around it hesitantly. It was warm and smooth against my lips.” We realize by the second paragraph it is a genderless narrator and not Tenisha who is speaking. Throughout the text though, the narrator’s gender seems to be shaping as masculine as the narrator engages in incessant prescriptive and normative descriptions and compliments of the female object of adoration, referring to her at one point as a “Shisha queen.” Yet, in another moment of slippage the narrator pipes, “Hookah—twelve captivating inches of pure delight.” Is the

narrator a “jellyfish” or a “dragon”? Both or neither? Gender, it seems, remains a pertinent and revealing category of analysis.

Heather Russell’s and Mel Cooke’s reviews of Christine Craig’s compelling *All Things Bright* embody many of the epistemological and methodological questions of voice, space, place, longing, belonging and vantage point raised in this editorial. Both reviewers agree that Craig holds a unique representational position as both outsider—poet— and insider—“daughter of the Jamaican dust” (Russell, 1). Craig is thus able to speak from intermediary spaces, in fact transitional places. Russell writes of Craig’s poetry: “the painful reality of exilic existence is given full expression and nuanced articulation as nostalgia quickly gives over to the wonderment of standing at the U.S.’s Southernmost point—the Florida Keys—the poet contemplating if this is ‘the end of America,’ or ‘her beginning.’” Russell then argues that migrations can be productive movements encompassing beginnings, “painful legacies,” “possibility and promise.”

Cooke interprets one of Craig’s poems, “Portland Morning” as Craig making “a statement about the transitory nature of life in a country which, for all practical purposes, marks its beginnings with the conquerors’ arrival and, it seems, people are always coming and going.” So even within indigenous borders there are third spaces. One does not always have to leave to be able to see differently. Cooke continues, “And, at the same time, there is that contrast in voice as Craig writes:

*Islands are every shape, every  
colour of goodbye.  
Walk good. See you next year  
if life spare.*

That this fifth issue of *CRGS* is the shortest to date in no way indicates a compromising of the intellectual rigor which has become a litmus test of *CRGS*. The question of the state and direction of contemporary Caribbean feminist and gender scholarship remains provocative; and for epistemological and methodological output to remain productive in the Foucauldian sense, this looking in on ourselves from unstable intersections must be perpetual, so that we do not become mired in categorical cathexis. The challenge to create new theories, new categories, new [semiotic, poetic] frames of reference is already being led by the very scholars who push us all to bring to crisis<sup>4</sup> tired epistemologies, tired categories, tired representations, so we can indeed reimagine *our* Caribbean.<sup>5</sup>

*CRGS* copy editor Jewel Fraser contributed to this editorial.

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<sup>4</sup> See Gayatri Spivak’s *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990)

<sup>5</sup> This phrase is a consolidating of Patricia Mohammed’s *Imaging* (2011) and Thomas Glave’s *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).