



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



Issue 3 – 2009

CARIBBEAN SEXUALITY: MAPPING THE FIELD¹

Kamala Kempadoo

Abstract

Caribbean sexuality is both hypervisible and obscured. That is, it is celebrated in popular culture as an important ingredient in Caribbean social life and flaunted to attract tourists to the region, yet is shrouded in double entendre, secrecy and shame. In this article, I present a review of the main trends in studies of Caribbean sexuality, arguing that while there are few exclusive studies on the subject there is much we can draw upon for insights into Caribbean sexual relations, sexual expressions and sexual identities. Drawing from published as well as “grey” materials, this article points out that Caribbean sexuality is often perceived and analysed as linked to force and (domestic) violence against women and children, sexually transmitted infections (i.e. HIV and AIDS), and economic imperatives. It is also widely accepted as attached to heterosexuality and gendered imbalances of power, as well as to men’s sexual agency. Studies of same-sex relations, transactional sex, prostitution and sex tourism suggest, however, a far greater complexity, which demands more elaborate and complicated understandings of sexuality. Moreover, given the range of sexual practices and relations that appear in the studies, we argue here for a conceptualization of sexuality as semi-autonomous from gender, and begin to map the contours of a specific area that can be designated as Caribbean sexuality studies.

¹ This is an updated version of an article published in *OSO: Tijdschrift voor Surinamistiek en het Caraïbisch Gebied* (April 2008), 28-51.