



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



Issue 3 – 2009

Le Jeu de Qui?¹ Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean*

Vanessa Agard-Jones

Abstract

By virtue of their non-independent political status, Martinique and Guadeloupe (France's Antilles) operate under a legal regime unique to the Caribbean vis à vis sexual rights. While in certain independent countries in the region homosexuality is criminalized and “homosexual acts” are punishable by law, France’s legal code both affords protections and extends certain rights, such as access to the PACS (the *pacte civil de solidarité* is a form of civil union available to both same sex and heterosexual couples in France since 1999), to Martinican and Guadeloupean citizens.

This paper seeks to understand the modes of representation that frame lesbian and gay Antilleans as subjects of particular (European) rights and victims of certain (Caribbean) violences. I document the loci of power that emerge as these discourses develop in a circuit between the Caribbean and the metropole, paying particular attention to the

¹ Translation: Whose Game?

* I would like to thank all of the people who read and commented upon early drafts of this essay, foremost among them Lila Abu-Lughod, Yasmin Moll, Marie, Varghese, Ram Natarajan, Anna Wilking, and Andil Gosine. In addition, the arguments contained herein were productively honed in conversations in the New York University Institute of French Studies doctoral student/faculty seminar. Sections of this work were presented at the Collegium for African American Research’s and the Caribbean Studies Association’s 2009 conferences in Bremen and Kingston, respectively, where audience and co-panelist questions proved invaluable. Finally, I am grateful for the interventions of the CRGS’ two anonymous reviewers, whose insightful comments continue to push my thinking as it relates to the larger project of which this paper forms a part.

questions of legitimacy and authenticity mobilized in these fields. I argue that, despite the best intentions of (mostly) metropolitan-based advocacy groups, these discourses support the mapping of a developmental teleology on the Antilles, labeling them less “modern” than their metropolitan counterparts. I question how this framing dovetails with French nationalism, particularly as it relates to the country’s self-perception as an originator and defender of human rights. Because these discourses sometimes occlude the complicated, everyday experiences of queer Antilleans (both at “home” and in diaspora), I integrate into my analysis conversations with various interlocutors in both the Antilles and in Paris. By examining the politics of sexuality in the French Caribbean, this paper is a simultaneous consideration of teleologies of development and the limits of liberal rights paradigms, as well as a critique of the politics of representation that impact queer lives in the Antilles.

Introduction

In April 2007, Paris-based gay magazine *Têtu* published an article provocatively entitled: “La Douleur des Makoumés: Homophobie en Martinique” (The Sorrow of the Faggots: Homophobia in Martinique) (Barzilai 2007).² The piece appears under a photograph of black male bodies in motion (presumably dancing), clothed in vaguely “tribal” wear; they are all bare-chested and photographed from the neck down; the person at the center of the shot wears a leopard-print armband and leather and raffia belt, slung low. The caption identifies the photograph as a scene from Carnival—a party called “Jungle Juice”—where during a “moment of détente, *homos* are accepted” (Barzilai 2007, 112).³ This opening scene—the spectacular title and the exoticizing photograph—set the stage for an exposé, ostensibly penned to reveal the kinds of violences and exclusions that gay and lesbian Martinicans face on the island. Through this paper I chart what else this scene and the article that follows reveals, both about the politics of representation and the rights-based rubrics through which those representations are framed in the “conversation” between French Caribbean subjects and their metropolitan counterparts. Moving from representations to the lived experiences of the subjects being represented, this paper uses discourse as a starting point for an interrogation of matters that are often missed in analyses of Caribbean sexual politics.

“La Douleur des Makoumés” was published on the heels of an increasing interest within *Têtu*’s pages in the question of homophobia in the Antilles, as they had published only two articles on the region in 2005, increasing to eight in 2006, and then finally publishing 15 interventions of varying lengths into the limited public discourse on the topic, in 2007.⁴ This evolution was marked by a shift on the part of the metropolitan-based

² “Makoumé” is a Créole colloquialism (sometimes spelled makomé or makomè) that translates, roughly, to mean faggot in English. In anglophone Caribbean slang, the word is most equivalent to “battybwoy.” Unless noted, all translations from the Créole and French are my own.

³ “Homo” is a French slang word, used more often than its anglophone equivalent in everyday speech between self-identified gay subjects. For more on language and sexual identity in French, see Provencher 2007.

⁴ Another note on language: “Antilles” is the French word for Caribbean, and is alternately used to refer solely to Martinique and Guadeloupe or to the region on the whole in French parlance.

editorial staff from an interest in Martinique and its “sister” island Guadeloupe as potential (gay) tourist destinations to a consideration of the role that sexuality plays both in local politics and in the everyday lives of gays and lesbians on the islands.⁵ Beyond the gay press, Martinique and Guadeloupe enter the French public sphere more regularly than other islands in the region because of the unique relationship that they retain to France: since 1946, they have been Départements d’Outre Mer (or DOM), politically integrated territories of that power’s first colonial empire.⁶ By virtue of their non-independent political status, Martinique and Guadeloupe operate under a legal regime unique to the Caribbean vis à vis sexual rights. While in certain independent countries in the region homosexuality is criminalized and “homosexual acts” are punishable by law, France’s legal code both affords protections and extends certain rights, like access to the PACS (the pacte civil de solidarité, a form of civil union that has been available to both same and opposite sex couples in France since 1999), to Martinican and Guadeloupean citizens.⁷

In the same month that “La Douleur des Makoumés” appeared in *Têtu*’s pages, posters cropped up at numerous sites throughout Guadeloupe’s city of Point à Pitre. They read: “ATTENTION DANGER- Ségolène ROYAL veut marier les Makoumès- Nous disons NON!” (Attention! Danger! Ségolène Royal Wants to [Allow the] Faggots to Marry! We Say No!) This was during the last rounds of France’s 2007 presidential election, when the electoral race had narrowed to a contest between conservative candidate Nicolas Sarkozy and progressive candidate Ségolène Royal. Far from an isolated series of postings, the production of the signs was coordinated by local political actors, rumored at alternate times to be members of either Sarkozy’s Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) or Royal’s own Parti Socialiste (PS) on the island. In Martinique, in the wake of the poster campaign, local political figures argued that homosexual practices (and moreover, ideas about gay marriage) were unacceptable to 95% of the Antillean population, largely because they were said to hold “Christian” beliefs that differ from those of French metropolitans.⁸ To many interpreters, the debate signaled a clear distinction between the moral codes deemed acceptable in hexagonal France (the part of the country located in Europe) and those valorized in its territories in the Caribbean. Dramatically and quite clearly, sexuality and sexual rights have emerged as a flashpoint in an ongoing political

⁵ I recognize that not all people in Martinique who engage in same-sex sexual activity identify themselves as gays and lesbians, nor do all people who engage in similar practices anywhere else in the world. For the purposes of this paper, though, *Têtu*’s interest in sexuality in the Caribbean is clearly tied to the subjects who assume those identity markers. For a compelling analysis of the relationship between sexual identity and those categories in Martinique, see Murray 2002.

⁶ The DOM, in total, number four: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane (also considered, depending upon the observer, to be a part of the circum/Caribbean), and Réunion. As departments, they are technically comparable to Provence or Brittany. DOMien(ne)s, (as their inhabitants are sometimes called) are citizens of France, eligible to vote in national elections and to participate in national political parties.

⁷ Ratified in France in 1999, the PACS allows any two non-related people (regardless of their gender) to enter into a formal relationship of “solidarity,” similar to civil marriage. According to France’s INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques/ National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies), in 2003, 43 PACS were signed in Martinique. In 2004 there were 94, and in 2005, 124 (more current statistics have not yet been released; earlier stats were: 2000: 20, 2001: 23, 2002: 79. To provide a point of comparison, in 2006 INSEE reported 1,477 marriages on the island.

⁸ See http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1i17o_occobondamanjak_politics

and social negotiation of the relationship between France and its dependent territories in the Caribbean.⁹

This paper seeks to understand the modes of representation that frame lesbian and gay Antilleans as subjects of particular (European) rights and victims of certain (Caribbean) violences. Representations, such as the ones circulated through *Têtu*, are key sites where the metropole's authority over its non-contiguous territories is both enacted and consolidated. I attempt to document the loci of power that emerge as these discourses develop in a circuit between France's Caribbean *départements* and the metropole, paying particular attention to the questions of legitimacy and authenticity that have been mobilized in these fields. I argue that, despite the best intentions of (mostly) metropolitan-based advocacy groups, these discourses unwittingly support the mapping of a developmental teleology on France's Caribbean territories, labeling them less "modern" than their hexagonal counterparts. I wonder how this framing dovetails with other French nationalist projects, particularly as they relate to the country's self-perception as an originator and defender of human rights. Because these discourses sometimes occlude the complicated, everyday experiences of queer Antilleans (both at "home" and in the diaspora), I also integrate into my analysis interview material from conversations with various interlocutors in both the Antilles and in Paris.¹⁰ Ultimately, by examining the politics of sexuality in the French Caribbean, this paper is an attempt at a simultaneous consideration of teleologies of development and the limits of liberal rights paradigms, teased out through an analysis of the politics of representation that impact queer lives in the Antilles, as well as in their French metropolitan diasporas.

La Douleur des Makoumés

In bright red letters a floating text box on the second page of "La Douleur des Makoumés" asserts: "If you don't have a computer and you want to meet people, you risk your life."¹¹ This dire pronouncement sets the tone for the article, which begins with the story of Michel, a teacher and activist who was attacked in Fort de France in late 2006. Michel was distributing condoms on behalf of an advocacy organization at the port, a place well-known as a pick-up spot for gay men (presumably those without computers), when a group descended on him with knives, leaving him in need of 21 stitches.¹²

⁹ Activist Mario Kleinmoedig has analyzed a similar dynamic in Curaçao and Aruba, islands of the Dutch Caribbean. There, gay marriage functions as a pivotal issue for indexing sovereignty when questions of political in/dependence are being debated (personal communication, 2009).

¹⁰ I use "queer" as a convenient shorthand here, fully cognizant of the fact that there is no equivalent term in French, nor is it the way in which my interlocutors either define themselves or their sexual practices. My interlocutors in Paris have been fairly evenly divided between lesbians and gay men, while my interviewees in Martinique and Guadeloupe are more often lesbian and/or bisexual-identified women, save for self-defined activists with whom I have interacted in Martinique, all of whom are gay men.

¹¹ The "you" being interpellated in this message is somewhat ambiguous: it is both the (presumably white, metropolitan) *Têtu* reader and the gay Antillean person, indexing a kind of community between those readers and the article's subjects. I thank Ram Natarajan for helping me clarify this point.

¹² I use Michel's real first name, as the article does, but decline to include his last name, which follows their convention, though I met with and interviewed him in July 2008 and May 2009. A note: the article misidentifies the advocacy organization's (Amvie's) work as being directed only towards HIV positive people, but their charter includes advocacy for LGBT people and sex workers (Fred Cronard, director, personal communication July 2008).

Seeking to account for the 43 instances of homophobic aggression that were reported in Martinique in 2006 (in addition to what Michel suffered), *Têtu* contracted journalist Martin Barzilai to write “La Douleur des Makoumés.” The article points to two key features of Martinican society thought to be at the root of its homophobia.¹³ The first is many Martinican citizens’ adherence to forms of conservative Christianity.¹⁴ Barzilai writes:

The strong influence of different churches, Catholic, Protestant, or Evangelical, constitute [sic] a form of social pressure. It is not rare to hear readings of the most contested passages of the Bible on this question (Leviticus XVIII, 22 and XX, 13)...This omnipresence is also found on a local television station, KMT, that systematically ends its programs with ‘That God might save Martinique.’ It is also in the name of their religious convictions that numerous elected socialist officials on the island have taken positions against those of their party on gay marriage or in respect of *laïcité*. That’s the case with Marlène Lanoix, first federal secretary of the PS, who in July 2004 called the PACS a ‘by-product of a decadent society.’ (Barzilai 2007, 113)

Here, Barzilai activates a common frame for understanding sexual mores in the Caribbean, one rooted in the politics of respectability and deeply informed by Christian orthodoxy (Wilson 1973). As anthropologist Deborah Thomas explains in regard to Jamaica, “Respectability...is a value complex emphasizing the cultivation of education, thrift, industry, self-sufficiency via land-ownership, moderate Christian living, community uplift, the constitution of family through legal [heterosexual] marriage and related gender expectations, and leadership by the educated middle classes” (Thomas 2004, 5). This vision of respectable conduct has been roundly criticized by Caribbeanist scholars, even as it has been taken seriously as a response to labeling the region and its people hyper-sexual (Thomas 2004; Kempadoo 2004; Mohammed 1998). But beyond the usual skepticism about this approach to the nexus between religion and sexuality, the revelation that a local television station uses a tag-line that references “God” in its programming would be particularly surprising for a metropolitan French audience because of the deep resonance that the political value of *laïcité*, or (public) secularism has in that country. Further, that Marlène Lanoix, an elected official aligned with one of the more progressive of the national parties, would use even vaguely religious reasoning in her articulation of a position against gay civil unions (the PACS) would be downright shocking. For French metropolitan audiences, the blows keep coming. In a text box on

¹³ There is a limited effort at the end of the article to articulate a more nuanced third “explanation” for Martinican homophobia. Toward this effort Barzilai quotes Stephanie Mulot, an anthropologist whose thesis research was on sexuality and matrifocality in Guadeloupe (Mulot 2000). She says, “Antillean identity is constructed on the basis of the individual having to respect the rules of the community. Identity must be collective and not individual” (Barzilai 2007, 114). Rather than blaming Christianity or popular culture, she points to the smallness of the islands and the community ethos that springs, in part, from propinquity. Parsing these explanations allows us to begin to examine the function of homophobia(s) in particular contexts.

¹⁴ The generalized anxiety about conservative Christianity may also reflect the shifting demographics within Christian adherence in the French Caribbean. While the majority of the citizens of the islands have traditionally been Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant churches have been making significant headway within these populations.

the following page of the article, large black letters read: “In the Bible, God says it’s an abomination” above the smiling face of Raymond Occolier, another member of the Parti Socialiste and mayor of the Martinican commune of Vauclin. In the mini-interview that follows, Occolier calls for “the next government to consult the Martinican population, by local referendum, on the question of gay marriage,” stating that “after Madame Royal announced her political program, that included gay marriage, a lot of socialist party members [*militants*] turned in their membership cards. We must stop the hemorrhaging [from the party]. I don’t want to be cut off from my electorate” (Barzilai 2007, 114). Quite clearly, conservative Christianity and its interpretations of scripture emerge to explain the homophobia that causes Martinican “makoumés” such sorrow.

The article goes on to articulate a second rationale for this state of affairs:

Martinique must face important social problems: high rates of unemployment, notably for youth, social precariousness that is not abating, undeniable economic difficulties, and the ravages of crack. Baseball caps, baggy pants, and Nike, [sic] many young people sport the bad boy outfit of the West Coast [presumably, he means of the United States here] and listen to ragga or dancehall. This style could be innocent if certain singers didn’t call for the murder of *homos*. (Barzilai 2007, 113)

In this instance, homophobia is interpreted as the result of the diasporic circulation of cultural forms, themselves understood to have arisen as a result of social inequality.¹⁵ Rather than the hagiographic framing of this circulation that a seminal critic like Paul Gilroy has invoked (Gilroy 1995), the movement of these cultural products between the United States and among the islands of the Caribbean is reframed as a threat. This echoes the kinds of arguments that have been made, particularly in Caribbean cultural analyses, about musical forms popularized since the 1980s. Almost invariably with reference to Jamaica, these works have focused on critiques of dancehall and ragga music—for their misogyny and/or their homophobia—and have inspired vociferous debate both within the academy and beyond. Much has revolved around Buju Banton’s 1991 track “Boom Bye Bye,” a song wherein the dancehall don quips, “boom bye bye inna batty bwoy ‘ead...rudebwoy nuh promote nuh nasty man dem haffi de’d.” This track’s circulation, first as an underground product in Jamaican dancehalls and then internationally when released on Banton’s Mercury Records-produced album, led to what Tracey Skelton has analyzed as “the airing of a debate about race and sexuality” (Skelton 1995, 275) in certain parts of the Caribbean and its diasporas in North America and the United Kingdom—and this same debate has only recently made its way onto the francophone circuit. With this airing, though, has come the consolidation of a type of binary critique: on the one hand, of what many (white) gay activists have referred to as the “exceptional” homophobia of “Jamaican (and by extension— Caribbean) culture,” and on the other, of what Jamaican/diasporic activists have charged is another round of cultural imperialism

¹⁵ In keeping with a typically French reluctance to articulate the racial markers of these forms, Barzilai never calls them “black,” even though that is the implicit marking.

emanating from the West, crystallized by the censorship of Banton's songs and boycotts launched against both his music and concerts.¹⁶

On one front, in these debates dancehall has been elevated as a beacon of resistant artistry, positioning the Caribbean against the decadent West, and heralded as the voice of the Caribbean's margins—the poor, the youth, and the disenfranchised (Cooper 2004; Niaah 2004; Bakare-Yusuf 2006). On another front, dancehall has become emblematic of a form of violent black pathology, uniquely homophobic and illustrative of the cultural backwardness of the region. As Faith Smith has remarked, in this era “issues of sovereignty seem to be waged more forcefully in the domain of sexuality” (Smith 2007, 136) than in any other, as these debates and the ways that they have called up international human rights standards, sanctions, and the withholding of global capital, have made clear. “La Douleur des Makoumés” sits smack in the middle of these conversations, as francophone artists such as Admiral T., Krys, and D. Pleen are identified in its pages as torch-bearers for the translation and re-articulation of the homophobic speech found in the dancehall music of their anglophone counterparts.¹⁷ Studies of homosexuality and homophobias in the broader Caribbean have paid attention to these issues, as well as to the particular intersections of cultural politics and national discourse on various islands of the region (Kempadoo 2009; Barrow, de Bruin, and Carr 2009; Glave et. al. 2008).

Still, the discourse on *homosexualité* in the francophone Antilles continues to be framed (by French journalists, activists, scholars, and politicians alike) as a binary opposition between Caribbean-ness (associated with violence, black popular culture, and Christianity) and an implicit French-ness (associated with rights, safety, and secularism). The solidification of this ideology inserts the Antilles into a developmental teleology, less aligned with the tradition/modernity binary that we often see in postcolonial contexts, but

¹⁶ JFLAG's response to the 2009 Boycott Jamaica campaign illustrates the ways in which local queer subjects have sought to develop and disseminate their own critique of both lines of argumentation.

¹⁷ A wave of critics have sought to make a more complicated intervention into this debate, acknowledging that in cases like these the stakes are high and therefore the imperative for nuance is great. Rather than forcing a choice between “colonial and sexual politics”(Chin 1997), certain critics have been moved to develop an intersectional blending of the two, both in this controversy and beyond (Johnson and Henderson 2005; Muñoz 1999; Gopinath 2005; Ferguson 2004). Sara Salih, in a 2007 essay on the Banton controversy, struggled to come to a less reductive reading of the dissonant registers at which it was (and continues to be) racialized, sexualized, nationalized and gendered. In an attempt to stake out her own position she asks, “What does it mean to be postcolonially queer, or/and queerly postcolonial, particularly in a context where the self-styled ‘local’ values of the post-colony are pitted against what are regarded as the permissive sexual mores of the west?” (Salih 2007, 1) I would like to suggest an ethnographic analysis, mindful of Salih's questions, that examines the relationship between popular culture and the forms of violence—both corporeal and symbolic—that shore up heteronormativity, as just one possible research agenda to which future scholarship might attend. Locating anti-gay ideologies and their continued relevance in authorizing discourses—be they religious, biological, or merely “popular”—may be an important way to evaluate the construction of both sexual and racial normativity, claims to authenticity, and their attendant formulations of the abnormal. Looking to “the multiple spaces where these contestations occur—the church, the dancehall, the street—and the increased visibility of lesbian and gay organizing in the Caribbean” (Alexander 2007, 160) is one of the tasks to which social analysts might set themselves, particularly as they work to disrupt the spurious binary that positions the “queer-friendly, progressive West” against its “retrograde, homophobic” counterpart in the Caribbean.

instead organized around a religious/secular one. Because arguably “tradition” is a less applicable conceptual frame for the Caribbean, a place that many argue has always been “modern” (Trouillot 1992; Khan 2001; Mintz 1996), this binary gets reworked through the French political value of *laïcité*, which itself functions as an index of modernity. The political division of the private and public spheres in French thought is, as in other liberal traditions, one that places politics in the category of the “public,” and both religion and sexuality in the category of the “private.” Feminist critiques of this spurious division aside, the ideologies that reinforce this separation continue to have powerful resonance. The article in *Têtu* is but one place where the representation of the Antilles as gripped both by a conservative-Christianity-gone-wild and a retrograde set of (black) cultural values is juxtaposed against the properly secular (white, European, though tacitly Christian) public space of the French republican state. This discourse draws lines of radical cultural difference to ostensibly “explain” the homophobic violence that occurs in a place like Martinique, even when much the same can be found in a place like Provence.

Within this logic, remedying the problem of homophobic violence would require admission that the Antilles are places in need of “development”—secularization and Europeanization—in order to fulfill the promises of their inclusion in France’s liberal rights regime. Here “development” is not tied to neoliberal humanitarian programs, like those promoted by economic development industries elsewhere in the region, but instead to ideas about the proper place for both religion and blackness in the French public sphere. While the article does not point to “development” as the explicit solution to the Antilles’ purported problem with homophobia, the suggestion is that Martinique departs from hexagonal France’s model due to a set of cultural values that are both behind the times and beyond the pale for a modern democratic state.

Qui Parle...?¹⁸

Returning to “La Douleur des Makoumés’s” opening gambit, the subtitle of the article reads, “Between the declarations of hostile elected officials against *homos*, the sermons that keep with the same sentiment, and the local singers who call for the burning of ‘faggots,’ the climate in Martinique is not the most welcoming. But gays and lesbians are not ready to *laisser faire*...” (Barzilai 2007, 112). But who are the “gays and lesbians” to whom this subtitle refers? Who are the subjects who will not let this Bible-beating and identification with homophobic (black) popular culture continue? Are these local actors? Diasporic ones? From whom did Barzilai get his information in order to represent the issue in this way?

Beyond the conversation with local politician Raymond Occolier, “La Douleur des Makoumés” reads like a who’s who in the debates over queer sexualities and their place in Martinique, including quotes from the organizers of various activist and advocacy groups, entrepreneurs, and scholars based both in Paris and Fort de France. While Barzilai is careful to present a fairly diverse set of positionings and experiences, a certain narrative about “good” and its battle against “evil” still emerges between the lines. Although this is a reductive frame, it still bears mentioning: activists, social welfare workers, and entrepreneurs are written into the narrative as the ones fighting the good

¹⁸ Who Speaks...?/ Who is Speaking...?

fight, and they are clearly positioned against locals with religious convictions, including public figures like Marlène Lanoix and Raymond Occolier.

Among the “good” guys are Amvie, the organization that Michel was working for when he was attacked at the port, though they had no representative quoted in the article. Patricia Louis-Marie, the director of Action Sida Martinique, the island’s oldest and most established HIV/AIDS organization, is referenced as having told Barzilai that condom distribution is still blocked by many institutions on the island (including secondary schools and prisons), even though the statistics for HIV transmission are dire (Barzilai 2007, 112). Lastly, Barzilai draws heavily on the analyses offered by David Auerbach Chiffrin, then-secretary general of An Nou Allé, an organization founded in 2004 as both the Antilles-Guyane arm of France’s nationwide network of gay and lesbian centers (CGL) and as an activist organization for black and métisse LGBT people in France. While An Nou Allé has had representatives based in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the majority of the adherents to the organization—including its founder Louis-Georges Tin and Auerbach Chiffrin—now live in Paris.

That metropolitan-based queer subjects play such a dominant role in the debates about queerness, race, and rights in the Antilles speaks to the ways in which the power of representation gets concentrated in diasporic hands. Further, while *Têtu* can be exceedingly difficult to find amongst vendors in Martinique (during a recent stay on the island I could find it in only one store), in hexagonal France it is the flagship publication for the mainstream gay and lesbian demographic and as such is widely available.¹⁹ The conversation that is then enacted through the magazine’s pages is largely a closed-circuit one, between people in the metropole rather than between the metropole and the Antilles. While remaining vigilant against a tendency to flatten and reify a North/South or diaspora/local divide, it is nonetheless critical that we question how emplacement either within the region or outside of it matters in these political fields.

Têtu is sited in a field of knowledge production and circulation that centers on international human rights-based advocacy and while not as nefarious (nor as coordinated) as what Joseph Massad calls the “Gay International,” (Massad 2002) the modes of representation that are circulated through *Têtu* are not only similar to, but are largely derived from the discourses developed by activist groups, with the French Caribbean material being tied closely to the statements made by (mostly) metropolitan-based members of An Nou Allé.²⁰ Given these dynamics, the conversation increasingly

¹⁹ The magazine may be something akin to what the *Advocate* represents in the United States.

²⁰ Since the publication of Barzilai’s article, that role has been increasingly fulfilled by TjenbéRèd, a splinter group that developed out of An Nou Allé (starting its work in May 2007) that is based more self-consciously in the metropole. Frequently, TjenbéRèd’s interventions and public statements are picked up by reporters at the magazine and are used as the basis for their stories. See <http://www.tjenbered.com>. It is fairly clear that the organization’s positions have been influenced by the work of Peter Tatchell, a London-based self-proclaimed human rights activist who has taken up controversial, universalist positions on a variety of LGBT issues. Jasbir Puar offers an insightful and important critique of his oeuvre, highlighting its investment in notions of Western supremacy (Puar 2007).

inscribes a narrative whereby metropolitan queers are mobilized to “save” local (Antillean) queers from local (Antillean) people.²¹

This framing is troubling, in part because of the way that it reifies and reinscribes colonial categories (the backward Caribbean vs. the enlightened West), but is even more so because it reflects the genuine good intentions and sincere desires on the part of metropolitan subjects to both document and combat violence. In her article on the “Tragedy of Victimization Rhetoric,” feminist legal scholar Ratna Kapur maintains that any attempt to argue with inequality starts with showing that it exists, usually by showing its victims (Kapur 2002). There is no denying that people fall victim to homophobic violence, both symbolic and physical, in Martinique (just as they do in Paris, Bordeaux, and Marseilles). Nor is there any denying that even the threat of violence, as well as of less spectacular exclusions, shores up a regime of sexualized inequality in the Antilles. But the crafting of a particularly Antillean victim subject and a particularly Antillean homophobic subject backs our political responses into a contradictory corner. When the problem is framed in this way, the possibilities for resistance get limited to calls for “development,” usually through public education. This discourse often leaps over actual queer Antilleans and their experiences, instead privileging the interpretations of activist subjects, themselves usually based in (or from) the metropole.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Zakia Pathak have argued that “discourse...works only by significantly excluding certain possibilities [in this case full representation of the subject]. It achieves its internal coherence by working within parameters which are ideologically fixed” (Pathak and Rajan 1989, 563). Similarly, Dorothy Ko questions the framing of the victim subject and the ways in which the binary through which it operates conceals the *actual* subjects of the discourse and turns them into a one-note monolith, united (and given voice) solely through their victimization (Ko 2006).

A number of my interlocutors in Martinique and Guadeloupe have emphasized to me that they cannot be reduced to victimized subjects living in a universally homophobic place. One, a Fort de France-based lesbian who publishes anonymously on her “Blog de Moi,” wrote upon first learning about An Nou Allé’s existence, “I am not going to deny everything they say, but believe me, there are ways of living one’s homosexuality here. ‘Constantly clandestine’ ‘social outcast status?’ ... No. Well, yes and no! So sorry to be raining on parades again! It really depends on individuals and their histories and it’s not worse here than it is in a small rural town. But I concede that some probably have difficult lives on the day to day.”²² Her urban, middle-class milieu makes her experience of living as a lesbian in Martinique something much less fraught than Barzilai’s article might have readers believe. Equally, her experience of sexual politics as a lesbian is inscribed—though not unproblematically—in the tropes of silencing and invisibility that Makeda Silvera highlights in her now-classic essay “Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians” (Silvera 1992). Referencing the

²¹ This point echoes postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s classic critique of representation and the victim subject in her 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice” (Spivak 1988).

²² <http://www.blogdemoi.com/2006/05/27/an-nou-alle-association-lgbt-martiniquaise/>. Thank you to Alice Backer for this translation.

work of An Nou Allé, other interlocutors have wondered aloud to me whose interests the negative representations that they proffer ultimately serve. They suggest that in the absence of an ongoing and serious engagement with the lives of people on the ground in the Antilles, these forms of advocacy serve to do little more than benefit the personal political and professional trajectories of the mostly diaspora-based advocates.²³

In “La Douleur des Makoumés” a similar problem emerges: local people unaffiliated with either activist or advocacy organizations make only cameo appearances. Even Michel, the “victim subject” whose story opens the article, is little more than a name, an age, and an incident—in other words, a prop. Everyday queer Antilleans only appear between the lines of the argument about homophobia that Barzilai and his interlocutors build in this article, though the violent incidents that impact on (but do not necessarily define) their lives are mobilized for activist purposes. Pathak and Rajan convincingly demonstrate how discourses of protection, in addition to giving “authority to speak for the silent victim...can [also] serve as a camouflage for power politics” (Pathak and Rajan 1989). This move “conceals” the power differentials between the protectors and the protected while granting legitimacy to the protectors to speak on their behalf. When this happens, an important consideration drops out of the picture: that emplacement in the metropole and emplacement in the Caribbean come to matter differently to queer subjects’ understandings of safety, strategy, and the “development” necessary to rid their communities of homophobia.

Activist proponents frame the limited rights that France extends to its LGBT citizens as critically important. The right to the PACS and the ongoing fight for rights to adoption, medically assisted reproduction, and marriage all activate a narrative about LGBT identity that centers on coming out, the assumption of queerness as an identity, public visibility, and political action.²⁴ If outness, visibility, and the spoken are taken as the measure of these rights, queer subjects in the Antilles are understood to experience them only as unrealized, particularly because so few people choose to, as they term it, *s’afficher* (to wear their sexuality on their sleeve). But the narrative that rarely gets taken seriously in this formulation is one that centers on discretion. Among my gay and lesbian interlocutors in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the grand majority have chosen to live their (sexual) lives discreetly, at least when they are at home. François-Xavier, a metropolitan man who lives and works in Fort de France as the proprietor of a cyber café, tells Barzilai that he approaches his outness in Martinique in this way, “I don’t hide anything, but I’m not ostentatious” (Barzilai 2007, 113).

Conventional interpretations of this choice would highlight its groundedness in fear—fear of gossip, of outing, or of violence. But I would like to caution against making the

²³ While no one to whom I spoke questioned the advocates’ sincerity, the gap between these actors suggested that the advocates’ intentions themselves emerge as a result of the development teleology at work.

²⁴ See the work of scholars like Martin Manalansan, Carlos Ulises Decena, Gloria Wekker, Gayatri Gopinath, and José Esteban Muñoz for important critiques of these teleologies of gay identity and the political projects of which they form a part (Manalansan 2003; Muñoz 1999; Gopinath 2005; Wekker 2006; Decena 2008).

analytical slip of understanding discretion to be equal to either passivity or some crude form of false consciousness.²⁵ In an effort to take seriously some of my interlocutors' beliefs that political inaction and personal discretion are preferable to the kind of action initiated by activist groups in response to homophobia, I wonder what it would mean to think about their positions as both a call for an alternate understanding of the steps necessary to make their living conditions more ideal and an instantiation of what Judith Jack Halberstam has called "radical passivity" (Halberstam 2008). In Halberstam's hands, radical passivity describes a subject position that declines the contestatory, that either cannot or refuses to speak, and can be used conceptually to rethink both passing and passivity as active in their own way.²⁶ The complicated stories of negotiation that my interlocutors in the Antilles have shared with me highlight some of the contradictions between having access to sexual rights and living under intense social pressure to "pass" as heterosexual. Yet some still understand the political projects of a diasporic activist group like An Nou Allé to be participating in a game that they would otherwise decline to play, as the next section of this paper will explore.

C'est le Jeu de Qui...?²⁷

While sitting in the parking lot of her apartment complex in Schoelcher, a bedroom community of Fort de France, my interlocutor Jewel,²⁸ a Martinican lesbian in her 30s, insisted that I answer her questions: "Whose game are they playing? Whose game are *you* playing?" We had been talking for nearly an hour about the "Ségo Veut Marier Les Makoumés" poster campaign, Raymond Occolier's call for a referendum on gay marriage in Martinique, and An Nou Allé's advocacy on behalf of victims of homophobic violence. I had expected a conversation with her about why there weren't any queer women involved in local contestatory projects, but instead we were talking about whether the issues themselves were worth contesting, particularly given the way that they were framed. She wanted to know whose game An Nou Allé was playing when they contributed to stories like "La Douleur des Makoumés" that would run and be read largely in the metropole. She wanted to know whose game Occolier was playing when he spouted off about calls for a referendum, even though the French legal code would never allow such an initiative. She wanted to know where I stood too—whose game I was playing—as I talked to her about my desire to craft a dissertation project on sexuality and politics in the Antilles.

²⁵ As Neville Hoad has insightfully argued, "The claim to rights on the basis of homosexuality has been a fraught business in the modern West. A universalizing faith in the liberatory potential of such politicization of sexual minority identities repeats the failures and fantasies of modernization theory without taking into account its devastating riposte: underdevelopment theory" (Hoad 2007).

²⁶ I am aware, here, that even this formulation of passivity insists upon an agentive subject, itself usually formulated as the measure of the full exercise of a rights-bearing subject's humanity. Halberstam's intervention with the notion of radical passivity is meant, in part, to circumvent the privileging of acting/action as the only proper way to deal with power relations. Rather than engage the active/passive binary much further here, I would like to suggest that the passivity that I describe may be diagnostic of the forms of power at play in the Antilles, as well as in other communities where sexual discretion is understood, by most queer subjects, to be the best option for their public lives. I thank Yasmin Moll for stimulating my thinking on this point.

²⁷ *Whose Game is This?*

²⁸ A pseudonym.

Surprised by her adamant tone, I stumbled. I hedged. But Jewel insisted. She approached these topics with an intensely skeptical (and expansive) eye, and tried to shift our conversation away from the questions that interested me then (“Have you ever been to an An Nou Allé meeting?” “Why don’t you consider that to be a good use of your time?” “Do you know the members?”) to the larger politics at play. While I would later come to understand (and agree) with her skepticism, our reasons for doubting ultimately differed. Like Jewel, I was concerned that the (mostly) diasporic subjects who purported to speak “for” lesbians and gays in the Antilles were complicit in other projects, ones that demonized Martinique and labeled its queer inhabitants victims. Not only did Jewel decline to construct herself as a victim, she focused her critique on how very different Martinique was from a place like Jamaica, a place she understood to be a “real” (and spectacularly unique) site of homophobic violence in the Caribbean. Jewel confessed a deep love for her island and its French-ness. She understood Martinique to *be* France, not a place in need of some sort of ideological development in order to be *equal to* France.

While I share Jewel’s critique of observers representing Martinique as a place in a state of developmental delay, in contrast to her position I am equally skeptical about the kinds of complicities that are shored up by insistently framing Martinique-as-France. I question how all of these positionings participate in a narrative about French national pride that many of its postcolonial subjects—from both the Caribbean and other parts of the world—have contested. I see both sides of this discourse—framing the Antilles as radically religious and Other to French secularism and downplaying island homophobia in order to claim those places to be “as French as France”—as moves that contribute to a reductively nationalist, or if looked at through the lens of *Têtu* and An Nou Allé’s advocacy, as part of a “homonationalist” project (Puar 2007).²⁹

Furthermore, I would like to suggest that current concerns with sexuality and its relationship to religion in the Antilles are haunted by the debates happening in the hexagon about the integration of postcolonial, often religiously marked, migrants into France’s political community.³⁰ Numerous scholars have written about the fraught relationship that France continues to have with Muslim, and particularly Algerian or Algerian-descendant, populations (Cohen 2000; Shepard 2006; Silverstein 2004). French anxieties about their integration into the national body have flared around the question of the headscarf and what its wearing is thought to represent about gender parity, ideas about women’s sexuality, and Muslim incompatibility with the French civilizational project (Keaton 2006; Scott 2007; Bowen 2008). This is the paradigmatic battle in the French public sphere, while questions about homophobia in its Caribbean territories represent, by comparison, mere blips on the metropolitan radar screen. For this reason, conversations about postcoloniality and modernity, particularly as they are filtered through debates about gender and sexuality, continue to refer to the perceived “Muslims

²⁹ Puar defines homonationalism as “a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of national homosexuality...[that] operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects” (Puar 2007, 2).

³⁰ This is also a trend in Europe more broadly, as countries from the Netherlands to Denmark to Spain participate in a near-continent-wide conversation about the relationship between Muslim migrants, “security,” and the neoliberal political order.

vs. France” crisis in the country. If queer activists are not careful, they may also contribute to the consolidation of France’s congratulatory narrative about its role in the global adjudication and spread of human rights.

The congratulatory narrative goes like this: France is the home of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. French universalism guarantees rights to all people, who are seen as equal (and unmarked by any form or group membership) before the state.³¹ Because of this political heritage, France is a beacon for other polities, and has taken a progressive stance on forms of inequality related to race, gender, national origin, and sexuality that other states should want to emulate. Given this narrative, ideas about French exceptionalism and the relative enlightenment of other countries’ governance systems are increasingly indexed by issues like the “emancipation” of women and the treatment of queer subjects.³² Indeed, when activists who want to contest homophobic violence in the Antilles call upon tropes of French-ness and lean upon French rights as the solution to the problem, they may end up playing a game that ultimately disservices them.

Who Speaks? Whose Game? What Next?

Throughout this paper I have sought to understand how modes of representation impact the subjects being represented, how having the power to speak may not run parallel with having the most politically efficacious things to say, and how the problem of advocating for the end to violence against queer subjects in a postcolonial (or neocolonial) context is fraught with pitfalls. By grounding their reasoning in one line of logic, advocates for change may fall in line with homophobic projects. By grounding their reasoning in another, they may support imperialist ones. While sketching a map of the political field as well as the seemingly intractable problems that are part of it remains an important endeavor, where does this critique leave us? Will we ever find a way to work around having the locus of power for representation rest in the metropole? What can we do with the good intentions of those metropolitan actors? Even more importantly, what do we do with the real violences that people suffer and the rights that might, in whatever incremental way, protect them?

Even given the enormous diversity that characterizes Antillean experiences in the metropole and in the Caribbean (Beriss 2004), there remains a complex gap between what these groups of people understand to be the meaning of the nexus between sexuality and rights in the Antilles. As an example of one way to bridge it, the Martinican lesbian responsible for the “Blog de Moi” has forged another locus of representation for queer

³¹ France has a peculiarly romantic, self-congratulatory narrative about its relationship with rights talk, given the nation’s central place in the genealogy of those frameworks. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) was a founding document of the modern French state, initially composed by the Marquis de Lafayette during the French Revolution, and is widely cited as a forerunner to documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

³² When French Secretary of State for Human Rights, Rama Yade, announced in 2008 that France would bring a resolution to the United Nations calling on all member states to decriminalize homosexuality, it was with the framing that this was a fitting call coming from France, the home of human rights. In this project, Yade has consistently referenced the over 90 countries in the world where homosexual acts are penalized and the five or six (all Islamic) states where a conviction on charges of homosexual practice carries the death penalty.

subjects in the Antilles. In this digital age, her work points toward the opening that new forms of media might provide in shifting the metropole-weighted distribution of those who are given the platform to “speak,” though the class-laden implications of this form of action remain intact. Rather than learning about Martinique only by way of analyses refracted through Paris, her blog is but one outcome of more democratized access to various public spheres.³³

Perhaps the more difficult problem to confront, though, is the conflict between the sincerely proffered political projects of those who seek to “liberate” queer Antilleans and the local (queer) resistance to those interventions. It bears remembering that both sincerity and good intention were at the heart of most colonizing missions, and France’s *mission civilisatrice* acted as the standard bearer. Returning to this time-worn yet still present dynamic forces us to acknowledge the limits of our political imaginations.

I offer these analyses not as an incitement to close down political projects, but rather as an urging to open them up, to question them in new ways, and to reconfigure and realign them as critically as we dare. Jewel’s reminder that we look to the big picture as we engage in these politics is one that we might well heed, while also paying more sustained attention to the everyday experiences of the people most affected by them. As an anthropologist, I am particularly interested in the relationship among imaginaries, representations, and materiality and am moved by the complicated ways in which our imaginations sustain us, but also work to occlude certain experiences. While some imaginaries function as necessary means by which we can dream and actualize certain futures, others turn into representations that bypass the experiences of everyday people. For the latter reason I am convinced that ethnography, that sustained engagement with people who do not necessarily have recourse to authorial or artistic authority, is of the utmost importance as we seek to understand sexual politics in the Caribbean. As we ask politically urgent questions about human rights, homophobias, the politics of respectability and about sexual “freedoms,” it would behoove us to also ask questions of those who every day negotiate these politics as they go about living their lives, for in the end, none of this *really* is a game.

³³ A number of anthropologists of culture and media have made important interventions on this front, documenting the development of indigenous “media worlds” and their interactions with global communications networks. On these topics, see the work of Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, Larkin 2002). I thank an anonymous reviewer for their reminder that the Internet, like the diasporic music circuit, harbors both revolutionary and reactionary potentialities. I acknowledge that while functioning as a site for the proliferation of previously unheard voices, it can also function as a site for the development of anti-gay political positions.

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